

ARNOLD, ABIGAIL S., Ph.D. *Essentialism Matters: Silence, Fear and the Feminist Dilemma*. (2014)  
Directed by Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly. 148 pp.

The project of my dissertation is to define the problem of “Woman” in this contemporary moment, to examine responses to it from popular culture and academic feminist positions and finally to suggest methods for mediating those responses in order to give academic feminism a voice and language through which it can speak to, and be heard by, contemporary, non-academic women in the United States. The project is designed to argue for ways to mediate among competing and conflicting notions of “womanhood,” and, beyond that, to what fuels the contentions behind these notions: the place of feminism in the academy and the American culture at large in this contemporary, post 9/11 moment where feminism is repeatedly hailed as “dead,” manly virtues of toughness and determination as ways to fight terrorism are juxtaposed with the language of choice and empowerment to explain women’s continued service as eroticized commodity to the culture at large, and academic projects with political goals are vilified. A primary means through which my project will advance will be to return to the theories developed by Second Wave feminists, and re-examine their ideas through the lens created by contemporary feminist critique, in order to see what we can re-learn and assimilate from their work.

ESSENTIALISM MATTERS: SILENCE, FEAR  
AND THE FEMINIST DILEMMA

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2014

Approved By

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deep appreciation and thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly for her encouragement, critical engagement and continued enthusiasm in the years it took this project to be completed, and to Dr. Nancy Myers and Dr. Sara Littlejohn for their invaluable criticism, feedback and support.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION: AN ACADEMIC FAIRY TALE**

Once upon a time, in the 1960s and 70s, a group of middle-class white women in the United States came together and discovered sexism. They created groups where privileged white women gathered to talk about what they experienced in their lives, and discovered to their astonishment, and personal sense of vindication and empowerment, that what they thought was personal turned out to be systemic features of a culture based on male prerogative, male rights, and male superiority. Males were considered “human” and Woman was considered “other.” When these groups of women articulated this, it was good, because they got some laws changed and now in America all people have access to choice and economic equality. They even got a new name—they were part of the Second Wave of feminism, the First Wave having happened long ago in the beginning of the twentieth century, when darkness still stood upon the land and women were considered men’s property and did not have the right to vote, use birth control or many of the other “inalienable rights” given to propertied men and codified into national law.

But despite the good these Second Wave women accomplished, they were also very, very bad. They were racist and classist and thought only about others like themselves. Most badly, they thought that all women everywhere

faced the exact same situations that they did, and other cultural forces never ever mattered except for being a woman.

And then a magical burst of fairy dust was blown across the world of Feminism beginning in the late 1980s, when another group of white women discovered the writings of black American women and a whole bunch of male French philosophers. These white women told the Second Wave group how bad bad bad they were—they called women of the Second Wave wicked witches, or “essentialists,” a word implying as much scorn and derision as is possible in academic argument. Anything essentialist was racist, classist and wrong, and women have nothing in common because they aren’t women at all. Women is a category defined by racist, classist, patriarchal culture and some people fit into it, others don’t, and no woman has anything in common with any other woman anywhere in the whole entire world. The hero of this time period was Judith Butler, and her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, around which the entire feminist theory world spun.

Some of the Second Wave white women (now older, getting gray hair and cancer) fought back. They denied that they were witches and told the younger academic women that they were misled, they were taking Women’s Studies out of political activity and too heavily into academic theory and jargon. If we can’t talk about women, these academics argued, how can we continue to create changes in women’s lives? They also said, over and over, that they weren’t racist, that yes, there had been unintentional and unrealized statements of white

privilege in their writings that they were glad to have been made aware of and had made changes, but also that in those initial consciousness-raising sessions and the political changes that they introduced, they were joined by women across the race and class spectrum in America. But no one paid any attention when they said this and if they did, it was assumed they were lying.

Then the next generation of feminists and feminist theorists came along. Since women didn't exist anymore and all the new research was going into gender and whiteness and male studies, they turned their attention there. They also, many of them, didn't bother reading the work of the earliest group of academic feminists since everything they read about them stated how racist they were, and this new group was living in a post-racial, post-woman moment where there was equality and sunshine everywhere, and the important thing was to focus on inclusive global concepts such as "intersectionality" and "transnationality" and not American politics, and certainly not what was being told, taught and expected of some generic monolith known as "women in America."

At the same time, a smart group of young feminists claimed space outside the academy, called themselves the Third Wave and wrote books about feminism in contemporary life. One book began with an account of its authors getting a bikini wax (justifying bikini waxing takes up a lot of space in the Third Wave). This group did a lot of interesting things out in culture, many of which are still going strong—although taking on waxing was not one of them. Once the next



wave came along, bikini waxing had become obligatory upkeep, like brushing your hair, and no one bothered justifying it anymore, they just did it without thinking about what it means to have created a standard of vaginal beauty that women must now live up to.

Now, you would think that academic feminism might have something to say about this trend among heterosexual Anglo-American women to get rid of all their pubic hair in order to be seen as desirable. You might imagine, for instance, what some of the most prominent Second Wave writers such as Andrea Dworkin or Catherine McKinnon might make of this expectation among heterosexual women and men that adult women must, with physical pain and at the recurring cost of about \$50/visit, make their vaginas look like they did before puberty in order to be attractive to men whose primary exposure to sexuality at an early age, and thus their expectations of sexuality, comes from internet pornography. Even a dowdy, angry but brilliant professor going on TV to comment on this new fact of American womanhood would have been a start. But, as is the case with many things happening to women in American culture, academic feminists, scared of the witches of the Second Wave and of being called one themselves, have remained largely silent.

And so it has been, and will continue to be, that academic feminists struggle amongst themselves to rewrite their own history, creating heroes and villains and magical theories, doing good in all the lands but also still fated to

repeat their own history and critically disregard those issues, causes and people who need their help.

Obviously, this fairy tale version of academic feminist history is distorted, leaves out a great deal of nuance, and dismisses much of the valuable work that has gone on in gender studies. But that does not mean it is not truthful at the level of myth. Women's Studies (or Women and Gender Studies or whatever name this discipline is given in any given college or university<sup>1</sup>) is a fairly new academic discipline and, like all new systems of power, it must create ways to mythologize itself, to create history and structure and meaning that establishes its importance and justifies its work. Fairy tales are one way that every culture does this. Dorothy Hurly, in her 2005 article *Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess*, discusses the role of fairy talks in creating and forming the self-image and belief systems of children. Fairy tales help to formalize and make manageable for children the rules and history of the culture they are growing into, so that they can navigate and succeed in that culture.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Alice Ginsburg, editor of the 2009 collection *The American Woman's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies and Change*, there are over 800 women's studies programs nationwide. While I can find no exact statistic on how many of these changed their name from Women's Studies to something including Gender in the title, I can list that the following programs at nationally recognized universities have changed their name, including: Northwestern University and the University of Chicago's departments are "Gender Studies." Yale University's is "Women and Gender Studies"; Cornell University's is "Feminist Gender and Sexuality Studies"; The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is "Women's and Gender Studies;" The University of Virginia is "Women, Gender and Sexuality;" and the University of California Berkeley is Women's and Gender Studies." As is the University of North Carolina Greensboro, where I write this dissertation.

As a new discipline in need of some kind of guiding operating system that articulates its self-image and belief system, academic feminism has institutionalized its own version of a fairy tale, a way to discuss its past that simultaneously promotes an agenda for the future. As with the features that Hurly outlines for the institutionalization of fairy tales for children, the academic feminist fairy tale:

a) *Must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility:*

Second wave feminists were racist and racism is wrong.

b) *It must be short and easily repeatable:* Every academic feminist knows a version of this story.

c) *It must past the censorship of adults:* if you disagree with us you are essentialist/racist so no one censors it. Also, academics get tired too and despite our ideals don't always look up the original source, instead relying on other's interpretations.

d) *It must address social issues...so that it will appeal to adults, especially those who publish.* A literature review of feminist theory over the past thirty years will prove this.

e) *It must be suitable to be used with children [or other academics] in a schooling situation:* obviously.

f) *It must reinforce notions of power:* As I will show later in this discussion, this mythology has basically created one legitimate line to academic

reasoning (a key way to measure academic power) in feminist theory by labeling those who disagree with it as racist and/or essentialist.

This mythologization of academic feminism shapes explanations of feminist theory and practice because of its singular and linear articulation of how feminism was, is, and must be. However, such a narrow version of itself proscribes limits for feminist theory which, ironically, are almost as limiting as the previous, historic absence of feminism.

Equally damaging, as numerous researchers in feminist theory are starting to point out, this story is, at its worst wrong, and at its best incomplete. African American and other minority women were involved in the Second Wave women's movement from the very beginning, working with, alongside and separately from middle class white women activists. Becky Thompson discusses the "common notion that women of color feminists emerged in reaction to (and therefore later than) white feminism" (338), stating that "This version of the origins of Second Wave history is not sufficient in telling the story of multiracial feminism. Although there were Black women involved with NOW from the outset and Black and Latina women who participated in CR groups, the feminist work of women of color also extended beyond women-only spaces" (338). Thompson goes on to cite numerous "women of color and white antiracist women" (337) theorists of the 1970s whose focus was

characterized by its international perspective, its attention to interlocking oppressions, and its support of coalition politics. Bernice Johnson

Reagon's naming of 'coalition politics'; Patricia Hill Collins's understanding of women of color as "outsiders within"; Barbara Smith's concept of 'the simultaneity of oppressions'; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's 'theory of the flesh'; Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of 'imperialist feminism'; Paula Gunn Allen's 'red roots of white feminism'; and Patricia Williams's analysis of 'spirit murder' are all theoretical guideposts for multiracial feminism. (338)

This list of theorists illustrates the depth and range of black feminism from the earliest days of the contemporary feminist movement, and its complexity is lost in the fairy tale version of academic feminism. Robin Wiegman, former director of the Woman's Studies program at Duke University (2001-2007) illuminates the importance of challenging the "now normative assumption that early second-wave feminism was indifferent to race, class, sexuality, or nationality"(135), in order to make it clear that women of color and lesbians were not late arrivals to second-wave feminism but were there from the start, not only as writers and activists but also included in the curriculum of the first Women's Studies classrooms. As Wiegman states, "Many of us trained as the first undergraduate generation of Women's Studies students were schooled in the lengthy discussions by Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and others about the content and politics of black women's studies" (135). The myth that Second-Wave feminists excluded women of color from serious academic inquiry and activist participation is simply wrong.

Erica Townsend-Bell repeats this insistence on the presence of minority women from the very beginning of the contemporary feminist movement, stating

that, while “conventional wisdom holds that the 1980s was the decade of multiracial feminism” (127), this assumption is wrong. Townsend-Bell examined numerous documents from the 1960s and 1970s, as she cites and references numerous writings by women of color and white women writing about racism from the 1960’s and 1970s, adding that “Minority women were quite active around issues of feminism but primarily through race-based organizations or autonomous minority feminist groups” (134). While she adds that it is true that writing by women of color in the 1980s, such as *This Bridge Called my Back* (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983) did expand awareness of minority issues in feminist movement and encouraged women of color to enter the movement, “but not because no writing was occurring in the 1970s or because women of color’s feminist commitment miraculously increased in the 1980s” (128).

As Becky Thompson points out, “tracing the rise of multi racial feminism raises many questions about common assumptions made in normative versions of Second Wave history” (338). Despite the historical record however, the commonly accepted story in feminist theory is that the early white feminists dominated the movement, focused exclusively on middle-class white women’s issues, ignored or were blind to differences between women of color and themselves, and are therefore essentialist. Feminist theory that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, charging the white women theorists and activists of the 1970s as “essentialist,” is so taken as an absolute given in academia that many contemporary theorists feel no need to cite these so called Second-Wave

essentialist theorists as they develop their arguments; they just claim essentialism as true and move onto their current research.<sup>2</sup> The essentialist accusation is accepted as true and natural, just as someone today can claim that the Earth revolves around the Sun without needing to cite Galileo.

The professional impact of being labeled an essentialist cannot be overstated, both for the individual being so labeled and also for the development of a full and complete feminist theory. As Jane Roland Martin states in *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy*, "If I had called a woman's research or she had called mine 'essentialist,' she or I would not merely have been offering criticism.... We would have been placing on it an official seal of disapproval" (10). This "official seal of disapproval" acts as its own kind of silencing police force in terms not only of the critical work being done in the academy, but also the critical work being imagined as possible by those of us who work and write in Women's Studies. Martin reminds us that there is a cost to such overwhelmingly accepted censure:

In any field of inquiry imagination is at a premium. In a relatively new area, which feminist research is, the free play of imagination is especially important. In addition, in a field as young as ours, the development of diverse and even radically divergent research programs is to be desired. I can think of no better way to dampen the creative spirit or

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<sup>2</sup> In her introduction to the 2000 edition of *Sexual Politics*, a foundational text of the Second Wave Feminist movement, Kate Millet discusses why her book was out of print for a number of years, stating "The field of feminist texts had become dominated by a prodigious number of collections of essays by professors of this new discipline who selected one another's work...secondary sources. Primary sources such as *Sexual Politics* were now seen as passe" (ix)

reduce interpretive diversity than to draw up a list of concepts to be avoided at all costs. (16)

In other words, the feminist cause is diminished because academic inquiry is labeled not just as problematic but also as morally wrong. This limitation of the field because of the demonization of second-wave feminism is echoed by Susan Gubar in her essay *What Ails Feminist Criticism* when she states:

A number of prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists, casting suspicion upon a common undertaking that remains damaged at the turn of the twentieth century. What does it mean that otherwise sagacious proponents of these two at times antagonist camps...have produced discourses that in various ways hinder the tolerance and understanding needed for open dialogue? (115)

This quote suggests that the foundational values of academic freedom and expression are no match for feminist academics unwilling or afraid to risk the “essentialist” label.

Toril Moi specifically engages this issue in her discussion of the term “woman” and its problematic relationship to academic feminism. Her essay *What is A Woman*, was written, she says, “from my sense of astonishment at the trouble ‘woman’ was causing in feminist theory. How did we land ourselves in a position where feminists genuinely felt that they had to surround woman by quotation marks to avoid essentialism and other theoretical sins?” (ix).

Citing Donna Haraway and Judith Butler as the leading feminist post-structuralist critics, Moi states that the post-structuralist argument surrounding



sex and gender, where gender is considered as solely a cultural construct and sex as solely an essence, “will [never] produce a good theory of the body or subjectivity. The distinction between sex and gender is simply irrelevant to the task of producing a concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman” (4).<sup>3</sup> In going on to explain the professional, academic-centered reason that feminist theorists need to reclaim the term woman, and the cost they believe they will pay if they do so, Moi states:

No feminist I know is incapable of understanding what it means to say that the Taliban are depriving Afghan women of their most elementary human rights just because they are women. The problem is not the meaning of these words, but the fact that too many academic feminists, whether students or professors, fear that if they were to use such sentences in their intellectual work, they would sound dreadfully naïve and unsophisticated. Such fear, incidentally, is not only grounded on a certain theoretical confusion about sex and gender, but also on the idea that academic writing and ordinary language and experiences are somehow opposed to each other. (Moi, *Woman*, 9)

Moi, Martin and Gubar are united in their firm conviction that something essential to the purpose and meaning of the academic discipline of Women’s Studies is getting lost. The fear that comes from finger-pointing and moralizing may come from a place of good intentions--the desire not to be racist—but its

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<sup>3</sup> Moi goes on to add “I do not mean to say that the distinction between sex and gender does no useful work at all. That we sometimes need to distinguish between natural and cultural sex differences is obvious” (5). I will return to this point in later chapters.

effect is to shut down thought, to misread and silence our own, fairly recent history.<sup>4</sup>

As always happens with silence engendered from fear, what gets lost is history. Claire Hemmings, a contemporary feminist theorist working out of the London School of Economics discusses the discrepancy between the claims of academic theorists and the historical record, stating “one reason why I find unsubstantiated claims about the essentialism of feminist writing in the 1970s so aggravating is that they ignore the rich discussions about the relationships among gender, sexuality and race that took place in that decade” (119). She goes on to describe her own experience as an academic who believed those claims of the essentialist nature of early feminists presented in contemporary feminist theory (as truth, without reference) and her own reaction to the disconnect between those stories and the truth of the multi-voiced complexity of the Second-Wave feminists. As Hemmings states:

I still remember my surprise when I first visited a feminist archive, perused newsletters and magazines from activist groups, and realized that discussions about sadomasochism in the lesbian community had been raging long before the “sex wars” and that black feminist and transnational critique had been a consistent component of feminist theory, rather than one initiated in the late 1970s or 1980s. (13)

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<sup>4</sup> That this silencing of history is part of what makes up the history of women and to recover lost voices, perspective and experiences is one of the crucial projects of feminism is an irony that I will discuss in my next chapter.

Hemming's quote suggests that the gap in knowledge about the Second Wave has larger repercussions than personal surprise: this gap between history and versions of history that circulate as truth mean that substantial feminist debate, that could inform contemporary theory and practices, has been unnecessarily lost.

Hemmings most recent project documents the ways in which feminist theorist tell stories of our own history. She breaks down these theories into three narratives that appear over and over in academic journals: The first, *Progress*, suggests that we have developed better sensibilities as we continue to define differences with the categories in which "we used to think of "woman" or feminism as a unified category, but through the subsequent efforts of black and lesbian feminist theorist, among others, the field has diversified...Far from being a problem, difference within the category "woman", and within feminisms, should be a cause for celebration" (3). The narrative of *Loss*, where the political and material imperatives of feminism have been irreparably damaged through the loss of the subject of feminism, where "we used to think of "woman" or feminism as unified, but progressive fragmentation of categories and infighting have resulted in increased depoliticization of feminist commitments" (4). And the narrative of *Return*, which argues for blending the positives of poststructuralist feminism with what we've learned about how to talk about people, a narrative that says "We have lost our way but we can get it back, if we apply a little common sense to our current situation...postmodern feminism leads to relativism

and political incapacity, while women everywhere remain disadvantaged” (4).

According to Hemmings, these three narrative structures dominate the ways in which the stories of the academic feminist movement are told, with direct results on the kinds of research and positioning that governs contemporary feminist theorizing.

In Hemming’s view, all three narratives use similar events, theorists and positioning to make their claims. That is, regardless of where a theorist stands on this issue she relies on common stories to base her claims and all of them contain “striking narrative similarities that link these stories and that facilitate discursive movement between them without apparent contradiction” (5). She goes on to add “You may know without me telling you that “the past” most often refers to the 1970s, that reference to identity and difference denotes the 1980s, and that the 1990s stands as the decade of difference proper” (5). Her goal in this project is “to analyze not so much what other truer history we might write, but the politics that produce and sustain one version of history as more true than another, despite the fact that we know that history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it” (16). My goal is different: I do want academic feminists to return to our own history in order to re-examine the myths we have told ourselves about it. The stories academic feminism tells about itself—these easily and oft repeated fairy tales—have left the field unavoidably constricted and inevitably limited and controlled by the stories own narrative dominance.

*History is more complicated than the stories we tell about it...* And the real-life consequences of the stories we tell about history are also complicated and lead directly to concrete issues of power and representation, financial security and physical safety, that directly affect the lives of contemporary women. Academic feminism knows the truth of this claim and indeed is dedicated to unearthing new history that includes multiple perspectives. The projects of academic feminism in English, History, Anthropology, Religion, and numerous other disciplines that uncover buried history and alternative story lines, that rewrite the literary canon and advocate for the inclusion of those education has historically ignored, are proof of feminism's determination to open up the power of representation. But, in general, it has not turned its critical eye on itself, to see where it has silenced its own history and instead has created representations that leave out and uncritically malign others in the field . The effect of this silence has had direct repercussions to feminism's waning importance in the world outside of the academy.

And now academic feminism has a problem. As feminists have concentrated their energies to actively deconstruct categories of identity—a necessary and vital project—they have simultaneously had the effect of deconstructing feminism's position as a definer of social thought. Academic feminism is not solely responsible for the demise of feminism as a powerful political force, but the silences that exist between academic theorists, and the disconnect of theory from every day middle class life have contributed to this

situation. Although academic feminism is concerned with social problems, its institutional imperatives tend to limit its vision. Ellen Messer-Davidow puts it this way: Academic feminists “made ourselves vulnerable by internalizing to academic discourses what we set out to analyze and change in society. Despite our professed concern with societal problems, our scholarly practices have recast them as discursive artifacts” (287), and therefore not as living issues to be influenced by theoretical positioning.

There was, and continues to be, obvious worth in dismantling the culturally conceived projections of what is meant by the category “Woman,” as well as identifying the racial and class bias which infused some Second Wave feminists’ use of the term in the early years of the contemporary feminist movement. But it is important to remember that the Second Wave feminists, who occasionally—but not exclusively—used this terminology with a rather fixed sense of meaning,<sup>5</sup> also accomplished tremendous political, social and legal gains in the United States. They did this in part by creating a national identification with the discrepancy between how the ideals of Womanhood were culturally expressed as law and social expectations and the concrete realities of many woman’s lives. That is, the cultural project of Second Wave feminists was, in part, to identify and

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<sup>5</sup> Catharine MacKinnon refutes this point in her recent book *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* when she states: “The postmodern critique of feminism seems to assume that the ‘women’ of feminist theory are all the same, homogeneous, a uniform unit. I do not know where they got this idea...Not from me. They don’t say. This notion that everyone must be the same to have access to the label ‘woman’ is not an idea that operates in feminist theory to my knowledge...Women, in feminist theory, are concrete; they are not abstract. They are not sex or gender, they are marked and defined and controlled by it” (51). This point will be examined in detail in my dissertation.

refute repressive cultural ideals of what I shall call “Symbolic Woman” in order to make concrete changes in the lives of all Americans. Unlike the current myth that Second Wave theorists were only concerned with middle class white women, they instead deconstructed the term “woman” by exposing it to the lives of real women and showing how culturally specified notions of woman, in conjunction with issues of race and class, constrained the actual, physical lives of individuals.

Too many contemporary academic feminists, however, have lost touch with, refuted, or ignored the theoretical and political concerns of Second Wave feminists and in so doing have lost touch with feminism itself. A result of this has been that many of the concerns of academic feminist theory no longer resonate with the lived experience of middle and working class Americans. These Americans are then left without the language and political resources to refute the noxious cultural symbols of what a woman is, symbols which continue to strengthen. While simultaneously, in academia, the fairy tale that Second Wave feminism has nothing to offer contemporary scholarship continues to thrive.

What are the consequences, in lived experience, for the fairy tale that academic feminism has told itself? What are the discrepancies between the way theorists in the academy discuss women and their lives, and the ways in which women and their lives are viewed and portrayed contemporary society? Why does it matter, in terms of lived experience, how a group of academics theorize anyway? And is there any connection between the academic feminist project and the “death of feminism ” that is repeatedly announced in the media, a death

occasioned by the claim that the women's movement has met all its goals,<sup>2</sup> The consequences of feminism's dominant narrative of its own history has resulted in a discipline that is cut off from itself, and in danger of repudiating the real achievements, both theoretical and material, of its own past. The discrepancies between the stories we tell about feminism and the historical evidence are large, and they matter not only to the field as academic pursuit but to the actual lives of real women and men. Revisiting the scholarship of the Second Wave, in particular, can yield stunningly accurate insight into this contemporary moment. To achieve this, we need to look at the benefits, the cost and the consequences, in lived experience, for the way the feminist myth has been framed by academic feminists ourselves, and to suggest how and why the myth needs to be reformulated to include the theories and experiences of the Second Wave.

The project of my dissertation, then, is to define the problem of "Woman" in this contemporary moment, to examine responses to it from popular culture and academic feminist positions, and finally to suggest methods for mediating those responses in order to give academic feminism a voice and language through which it can speak to, and be heard by, contemporary, non-academic women in the United States. The project is designed to argue for ways to mediate among competing and conflicting notions of "womanhood," and beyond that, to what fuels the contentions behind these notions: the place of feminism in the academy and the American culture at large in this contemporary, post 9/11 moment where feminism is repeatedly hailed as "dead," manly virtues of



toughness and determination as ways to fight terrorism are juxtaposed with the language of choice and empowerment to explain women's continued service as eroticized commodity to the culture at large, and academic projects with political goals are vilified. A primary means through which my project will advance will be to return to the theories developed by Second Wave feminists and to re-examine their ideas through the lens created by contemporary feminist critique, in order to see what we can re-learn and assimilate from their work<sup>6</sup>.

Chapter Two, *The Problem*, examines the lack of accessible, relevant language and theory to connect academic feminism to the broader, non-academic culture. This chapter closely examines the post 9/11 environment in which narratives that reinforce traditional ideologies of women have reinserted themselves into cultural expectations of normal behavior. The lack of accessible, relevant language and theory coming from the academy while it pursues its own projects has served to reinforce the dominant ideology of Woman as symbolic being—rather than actual human—that exists in our culture at large, and that (ironically) academic feminism has fought so hard against.

Chapter Three, *Sexy Feminism*, closely examines the gendered stereotyping, language, and cultural expectations that shape the extreme

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<sup>6</sup> Because the focus of this dissertation is to examine the gaps between American popular culture and American feminist theory, I will not look at one of the more exciting movements in contemporary feminist theory, the exploration of transnationalism. I am deliberately focusing on American issues only. The world-wide dominance of American popular culture gives it an impact beyond our national borders. How women are treated in our culture impacts how they are viewed elsewhere. In addition, I believe that American culture needs a critical eye turned back to it—the emphasis on global equity is an important and worthwhile project, but if it happens at the expense of examining ourselves it comes at a high cost.

gendered nature of American popular culture and the way in which feminism (now called “personal empowerment”) has been co-opted to reinforce retrograde gender ideology of women. The chapter uses Susan Douglas’s term ‘enlightened sexism’ as a way to describe, give voice to and combat the cultural narratives that, in the absence of viable critical alternatives, have turned feminism into another lifestyle choice that in effect reinforces patriarchal ideology. Chapter Two concludes with examples from Second Wave theorists who described and proposed remedies for this.

Chapter Four, *The Body*, looks at the discrepancies between the ways in which women’s bodies and the category “woman” are discussed in the academy and outside of it. This chapter focuses attention on the uses and misuses of the now widely accepted distinction between the terminology of “sex” and “gender” and how the ubiquity of these terms may not serve the theoretical and cultural purposes the distinction intends. To help in this analysis, Chapter Three examines the work of contemporary scholars Judith Butler and Toril Moi, and Second Wave theorists Catherine MacKinnon and Susan Griffin. Chapter Two ends with a look at the consequences of the theoretical dismantling of the term woman and the woman’s body, comparing this to the way women’s bodies are used, abused and talked about in the culture at large.

Chapter Five, *Rape Culture*, examines the culture of rape that continues to dominate narratives of American life and cultural expectations of gender. Drawing on the work of Second Wave theorists Andrea Dworkin and Susan

Brownmiller, among others, this chapter details how their definitions of rape culture are still relevant and useful in describing the rape culture we live in today.

Chapter Six, *The Problem That Has No Name*, draws heavily on the work of Second Wave theorists to directly address the patriarchal and sexually objectified world we still live in. This chapter draws on Betty Friedan's language in *The Feminine Mystique* to show that her thesis that we live in a world dominated by outdated ideology and gendered standards is still useful as a way to navigate this contemporary moment.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE PROBLEM**

Despite the early political gains of Second Wave feminism, the critiques by women of color of white feminists' appropriation of the term "Woman" were both valid and necessary, in part because they allowed for continued political and social advancement of previously marginalized groups of people. Similarly, the continued academic project of teasing out what we mean by identity category of "Woman" has had important ramifications in continuing to identify areas in which women are "othered" in our society. However, with the continued and extensive dismantling of the cultural terminologies of gender and resulting in the sometimes whole-sale denunciation of the term and identity of "Woman," the academic project has gone too far, in some ways abandoning revolutionary concerns about the gendered realities of American life and instead circling back to align with patriarchal expressions of power and authority.

On an institutional level, for Women's Studies Programs to even exist they must in many ways play the patriarchal power game. Of more concern, however, is the ways in which too many American academic feminists have rejected the theorizing of earlier feminists by giving their work the label

“essentialist”<sup>1</sup> and moving on, many to instead embrace a poststructuralist theoretical model descended, in part, from male French philosophers. Feminist theorists’ act of rejecting, ignoring or being in some cases even ignorant of the work of the primarily women theorists who came before them, is an enactment of the patriarchal based thinking which devalues the work of all but the occasional “exceptional” woman and instead rewards those who follow in the established—masculine—tradition. Susan Bordo describes the attempts of poststructuralist feminist theorists to criticize and disregard gendered-centered readings of culture “*barely more than a decade after they began to be produced*” (142, her italics). She then demands that we “consider the degree to which this serves, not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles, but the academic hegemony (particularly in philosophy and literary studies) of detached, metatheoretical discourse” (142). Silencing women who operate outside of the realm of traditional patriarchal hegemony has certainly worked in the past.

This patriarchal realignment occurs throughout history.<sup>2</sup> The continued historical erasure of women’s work is a claim made by many significant theorists

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Donna Haraway’s influential essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” where she claims, without referencing anyone specific, that “White women... discovered (i.e. were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the noninnocence of the category “woman.” “ (199) Judith Butler states in the article “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse” that “a variety of women from various cultural positions have refused to recognize themselves as ‘women’ in the terms articulated by feminist theory” (325), again without referencing either the women who don’t recognize themselves and the specific feminist theory/theorists they are speaking against.

<sup>2</sup> Critic Rebecca Solnit calls this erasure of women “obliteration,” saying “there are so many forms of female nonexistence” (74) including the following: family trees only focusing on the male line, wiping out generations of women from individual families; the historical practice (until very recently changed) of referring to married women as Mrs. Husband, as in : “You stopped, for example, being Charlotte Bronte

of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. As the editors of *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetorics* state:

Throughout the years covered in this anthology (the fifth century B.C.E.-1999) women must repeatedly argue for the right to speak in public at all. Over and over again, they must claim the right to name themselves rather than to be named. Many of these texts, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, read as if a particular woman is writing or claiming the right to speak for the first time, without a history of writing behind her; too often it feels eerily as if she is writing alone. (xvii)

Adrienne Rich agrees and addresses the problems in the silencing of feminist history in her succinct statement that "The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over...each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present" (11). It appears that in this contemporary moment, in academia, feminists are now the ones silencing our own history and limiting the terms on which we speak. And as Hemmings shows us in her surprise that once she examined the writings of the Second Wave an alternative view of feminist history emerged, it is imperative that we do not re-write our past in a way that extinguishes the work of those who came before us. My solution to reclaim the work of Second Wave theorists in light of contemporary critiques and see how we can apply this work to the present moment comes from political pragmatism. If there was one thing Second Wave feminists did remarkably well it was to speak

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and became Mrs. Arthur Nicholls" (73), the cultural practices of the veil, the chador, the confinement of women to their homes.

to the concerns not only of the few women working in academia at the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement, but to articulate, and politically arouse, society at large. Current academic feminism speaks primarily to itself, in language that only it can understand.

This silencing of Second Wave feminism has contributed to the re-emergence of “Symbolic Woman’ in the cultural ideology of what a woman is and how she should behave. This re-emergence is particularly true in the post 9/11 contemporary moment as Susan Faludi documents in her book The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America. Faludi posits that one of the primary cultural impacts of the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> attacks was to return America to a lived belief in the standards of manliness which dominate our cultural myths. As Faludi states,

The suddenness of the attacks and the finality of the towers’ collapse and the planes’ obliteration left us with little in the way of ongoing chronicle or ennobling narrative. So a narrative was created and populated with pasteboard protagonists whose exploits would exist almost entirely in the realm of American archetype and American fantasy. (*Terror Dream*, 64)

Faludi then demonstrates that the narrative called forth by the attacks involved men being the heroic rescuers. But, as she states, because the attacks were so overwhelming, there was no one to be rescued. For Faludi, this begs the question “what was a rescuer without someone to rescue?” (*Terror*, 53). That is, how did American mythology, dependent on the trope of the heroic, self-sufficient

male able to protect and defend his community, react when the attacks were as overwhelming as those on 9/11?

To provide a heroic context for the familiar American archetype of rescuing male, women became the subordinate people needing rescue. Faludi gives numerous examples to support this claim. For example, *Newsweek* Magazine, in a special 9/11 “commemorative issue” included a photo display of “Heroes.” All but one were men, although women were included as firefighters, emergency responders and in the police force that day. Another example of the way women heroes were shut out of the story: The story of the passengers on Flight 93, the ones who attacked the terrorists and forced the plane to crash, has been told primarily as a story of male passengers saving the Pentagon. But Faludi documents that women played a part in this brave act as well—flight attendant Sandy Bradshaw told her husband in a goodbye phone call that she and another flight attendant were boiling hot water to scald the terrorists, and had to get off the phone to “run to first class” with her weapons.

What primary cultural role did women play in 9/11 if the stories of their heroism are erased? In spite of their actions, women were primarily portrayed in the role of victim in the post 9/11 scenario. The 9/11 widows became a cultural touchstone for grief and loss. Certainly their personal grief was profound, just as the male heroes were heroic,<sup>3</sup> but Faludi points out that

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<sup>3</sup> I want to emphasize that my discussion here centers on the gendered cultural representation of the people involved, not on their personal actions, loss and grief.



the 9/11 widows who were most singled out and deemed worthy of being “taken care of” fit a particular profile. They weren’t ambitious careerists trading commodities on the eighty-fourth floor. They were at home that day tending to the hearth, models of all-American housewifery. *New York* magazine’s one-year anniversary feature on the families of the 9/11 dead chose four widows to showcase: Lori Kane, “a stay-at-home New Jersey mom”; Anna Mojica, “who worked at a bank after high school but gave up the job when Stephanie was born”; Emily Terry, an Upper West Side mother of three” who “left a job at the International center of Photography after her first child Hannah was born” ; and LaChanze Sapp-Gooding, an “actress and mother of two” who was “taking a work break this fall”—at the suggestion of her male psychiatrist (*Terror*, 93).

The ease with which the media immediately, effectively took the people whose lives were irrevocably changed by this tragedy, and assigned them roles based on stock masculine and feminine characters, is rarely discussed.<sup>4</sup> When people did comment on the gender norms at play in the immediate post 9/11 world, the norms were often taken as a representation of cultural standards and another “death of feminism story” showed up in the media. Americans needed to feel secure after 9/11, and to do this they culturally fell back on their most fundamental divide between men and women. In this way, American manliness, which in reality did not stop the attacks or save people from dying, could be redeemed and our culture could feel less afraid of the terrorists.

For this manliness to effectively do its job of “fighting terrorism,” its cultural opposite—a kind of hyper-femininity—must also be present. According to Faludi, then, the standards of “Symbolic Woman” become an unstated, but fully realized, patriotic duty.

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<sup>4</sup> In fact to do so was considered “unpatriotic.”

The myth of American invincibility required the mirage of womanly dependency, the illusion of a helpless family circle in need of protection from a menacing world. Without that show of feminine frailty, the culture could not sustain the other figment vital to the myth, of a nesting America shielded by the virile and vigilant guardians of its frontier. (*Terror*, 145)

Yet, the fear engendered by 9/11, and the resulting cultural amplification of traditional notions of womanhood, has received little attention in the academy.

There is a troubling irony here: as newly reified images of the sexual and domestic imperatives of contemporary womanhood took hold in popular culture, academic feminists turned away from any engagements that might be deemed essentialist, including investigating the “essentializing” that was taking place in American culture. Susan Bordo describes this as “the dogma that the only ‘correct’ perspective on race, class, and gender is the affirmation of difference; this dogma reveals itself in criticisms which attack gender generalizations as in principle essentialist or totalizing” (139). Contemporary feminist theorists have focused intently on their own academic and theoretical projects at the expense of engagement with anything that feels connected with “essentialist” positioning, despite the fact that essentialist depictions of women in culture have grown more and more entrenched. And not only have academic feminists dismissed or ignored the ideas of early feminists, but they also continue to have difficulty connecting their projects to the culture at large and the current lived experience of women’s daily lives.

The culture at large has the same difficulty connecting back to academic feminism. In her best-selling 2011 book, *How To Be A Woman*, that examines

the importance of feminism to the contemporary moment, Caitlin Moran, cultural critic and columnist for *The Times of London* explains:

I turned to modern feminism to answer questions that I had but found that what had once been the one most exciting, incendiary, and effective revolution of all time had somehow shrunk down into a couple of increasingly small arguments, carried out among a couple of dozen feminist academics, in books that only feminist academics would read.  
(11)

She goes on to say that, while “traditional feminism would tell you that ...we should concentrate on the big stuff like pay inequality, female circumcision in the Third World, and domestic abuse” (12), it is also important to pay attention to “all those littler, stupider, more obvious day-to-day problems with being a woman [which] are, in many ways, just as deleterious to women’s peace of mind” (12). Moran is directly addressing Western women living in the United Kingdom and The United States when she talks about things such as what she calls the “war on pubic hair,” the “constant pillaring” of influential women, represented in the media as being too fat or too poorly dressed, the pressure to have “the perfect wedding,” marriage, the decision to have children or an abortion. She argues that by attending to the smaller concerns we simultaneously help solve the larger ones, in the same way that New York City’s “Broken Window Policy” of fixing the small damages done to homes and businesses in high crime rate neighborhoods had the larger effect of lowering crime throughout the neighborhood. Feminism needs to address the everyday issues, Moran argues, “the awkwardness,

disconnect, and bullshit of being a modern woman” (13) in order to realize its larger goals.

In this concern with the daily lived reality in the life of contemporary women, she echoes another cultural critic, University of Michigan professor Susan J Douglas who discusses the high visibility of a few key women running for public office, and the even higher representation of women on TV shows portrayed in demanding jobs such as lawyer, surgeon, chief of a detective squad, as juxtaposed against the reality that the top five jobs for women in 2007 were close to what they have always been: “in order, secretaries...registered nurses, elementary and middle school teachers, cashiers and retail sales persons”(3). Douglas calls what is going on in popular culture “enlightened sexism” (13) and states that it is built, in part, on “embedded feminism” in a younger generation who assumes the rights that previous generations had to fight for, without the language to articulate that women today are still “second-class citizens” (17).

The net result of this failure to connect academic feminism to the broader, non-academic culture, this lack of accessible, relevant language and theory, is silence. And the effect of silence is actually to reinforce the dominant ideology of Woman as symbolic being—rather than actual human—that exists in our culture at large, and that (ironically) academic feminism has been fighting so hard against. The silences in feminist theory are huge: between current and older theorists, between generations, between those within the academy and those without, between those labeled biological determinists and those labeled social

constructivists. There is high price to pay for this silence. To quote poet and activist Audre Lorde “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you...And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (302-303). Lorde is one of many Second Wave theorists whose projects were devoted to breaking silences. Think of Tillie Olsen’s book *Silences*, which opened the literary canon to voices of the working-class, people of color and women, Adrienne Rich whose *Of Woman Born* gave voice to the experience of motherhood and of course Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* which articulated the unvoiced beliefs and unexamined institutional policies that limited the lives, most particularly, of white middle class women. Addressing the cost of silence, as well as breaking it, was a primary goal of the Second Wave feminist movement.

Krista Ratcliffe discusses the implications of entrenched ideological positions and the silencing of viable options in an essay discussing the rhetoric of textual feminism in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas. In her essay, Ratcliffe quotes Kenneth Burke’s definition of rhetoric as including “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (Ratcliffe, quoting Burke, 401). She then uses this definition to lead into a discussion of the linguistic work to be done:

If women and feminists are to speak their feelings and assume power within the symbolic realm, they must continually rupture the discourses

of the dominant ideology *from within*...if we question such a separation [between materialist and poststructuralist language theories] by assuming a broader definition of each category and by recognizing the material implications of language, we can demonstrate these categories' interweavings and avoid false polarization. For example, instead of asking "which is more important—textual strategies or battered women?" we can ask "how do textual strategies reflect/construct personal and cultural logics that make battering possible and impossible?" (404)

The implication of this argument is that if feminists do not "assume a broader definition," the symbolic realm of Woman, and the material conditions under which she lives, will remain falsely polarized, both within and without academia. Thus through the silencing and strangulation of ideas within feminism, through the inability to disrupt the dominant discourse between and among competing feminist ideological positions, feminism silences itself. And thus patriarchy—or, more of the same—wins.

In some branches of the academy, "women" may not exist, but a generic woman, built on sex appeal, regressive standards of feminine submission and devotion to the home (combined with the ability to earn a large paycheck and raise a perfect set of children) is fully alive in the culture we live in. If academic feminism reached one end of an extreme, placing "women" in quote marks and denying they exist, culture has gone to the other extreme and said that women are all interchangeable and want the same thing. The way contemporary women have been grouped and categorized into a monolith, as shown in contemporary elections, exemplifies the critiques many academics have with the category

“woman.” But denying that they exist at all does not give us the language or tools to speak against this pervasive cultural construction.

An example of what happens when an unproblematic view of “Woman” holds cultural currency comes from the recent Presidential elections from 2004 through the present. In each election, “Women” were recognized to be an important demographic vote, tipping the scale between the two candidates. Demographically identifiable groups of women had a number of labels: soccer moms, married women, single young women in their twenties. These demographic blocks are actually quite distinct from each other and, as are all demographic labels, as misleading as they are revealing. But every presidential campaign—John Kerry, George Bush, John McCain, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama (twice)—ran simple-minded slogans designed to appeal to all of them all at once: *W is for Women*, *Women for Kerry*, *Women for Obama*, *Women for Romney*. And as far as I know, no one in the media has ever questioned this. Analyzed the slogans, to be sure; discussed how the two campaigns needed the woman vote, yes. But question what it means to say you are for “Women?” Or what it means to put single urban women in their twenties in the same category as married suburban mothers in their forties into a single group—no. The generalized category “woman” that could encompass all of these people was never challenged. It was—and is, and sometimes seems as if it always will be—as if individual women cannot be recognized when the mammoth cultural totem known as “Woman” appears.

Even *Ms. Magazine* got reactionary in the 2004 election, falling back onto a time-worn version of the “Angel in the House” image of women which, it could be argued, the magazine had spent the previous thirty years trying to dismantle. The cover of the fall 2004 issue, in a bold red and white cover, asks the question (framed in a star) “*It’s the Women, Stupid: Will it take 22 million women to save the world?*” The women they are referring to are the 22 million single women who, according to *Ms.*, if they would only vote, could be counted on to vote Democratic. What was striking to me, however, beyond the hubris of that assumption, is the way *Ms.* positioned women as the savior and redeemer of the world, and positioned George Bush not as a political opponent, but as an evil villain from whom only women’s wisdom and guidance could save us. What does it say about the way our culture thinks about women, the way women feminists think about ourselves, and the role fear plays in returning us to conservative gendered identities, that *Ms.* so easily fell back onto antiquated stereotypes that have been used to justify centuries of legalized oppression?<sup>5</sup> And what does it say about the disconnect between the academy and popular culture that this happened simultaneously when the arguments to dismantle the term “woman” reached its zenith in academic discourse?

In the 2012 election, the fear that gripped the country was more economic than terrorist based, and the candidates had to display more empathy and a more nuanced understanding of “women’s issues” than anytime previously. They

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<sup>5</sup> While *Ms.* clearly supported Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections, they did not use such regressive language to do so.



understood that women's votes were going to decide the election<sup>6</sup> and each campaign did their best to target "women" as an identity group. It seems safe to say that the Republicans did not come out ahead on this issue. Mitt Romney's "binders full of women" comments, Todd Aiken and the notion of "legitimate rape," along with the Republican platform's positions on numerous issues, were mocked as being out of touch with the needs of everyday American women. When placed alongside the Democrats successful rhetorical reframing of abortion from a moral issue to a health care issue, and of gay marriage as a human issue, it is no surprise that the Democrats had the upper hand. But still, both parties remained stuck in the ideology that there is a monolith called "woman," universal in nature and comprised of individuals who are indistinguishable from each other.

None of the recent presidential campaign have run similar appeals to men. We saw no signs saying *G is for Guys*, or *Obama for Men*. Men are implicitly understood to be more individualized than this. We would laugh if a political candidate said he was "for Men." Yet the media, the electorate, the politicians all seem to understand what it means to be "for Women." There is still a cultural understanding that Woman exists, and she will, and needs to, behave in certain ways. Woman—and all the individuals who comprise that category, however they got there—is still "Other," as Simone deBeauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex*:

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as americanprogress.org states "Women's voices determined the outcome of the election" with 53 percent of total voters in the election being women, with over half of them voting for Obama.

humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.<sup>7</sup>

The example of political campaigns make the continued relevance of deBeauvoir's claim abundantly clear. Politicians do not declaim that they are "for Men," because the implicit assumption is that men are Subjects, unique and autonomous. Women, or "the Other," are interchangeable.

In the 2004 election, despite being "for Women," John Kerry's perceived "girlie-ness" (he likes to windsurf and has a wife who is more wealthy than he is) did nothing to help him during a time when the country was voting against fear associated with violence—fear of terrorists if you were a Republican, fear of George Bush if you were a Democrat. In 2012, economic fear threw voters in the opposite direction—the candidate who recognized and empathized (a so-called women's role) with the financial, health and employment challenges of much of the nation won re-election. Mitt Romney was repeatedly accused of having an "empathy gap," which in the end appeared to matter more than his success in business and politics. In 2012, America was scared of things that hurt us at home, in our private lives, where women have traditionally held some degree of authority. We trusted the candidate who showed more completely that he was

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<sup>7</sup> Another contemporary example: the Sunday April 30 2013 Opinion page of the New York Times, where Amanda Filipacchi discussed how the volunteer editors at Wikipedia had begun to move the women listed in the American Novelists entry into their own, separate listing of American Women Novelists and no longer appeared in the American Novelist category, along with the hostility she encountered as she changed it back.

“for women,” and assumed as a culture that we knew what this meant. There’s nothing like a good dose of fear to thrust citizens back into their most conservative, gendered selves.

The recent presidential elections, with their polarizing notions of what defines woman, are only some of the ways in which national fear has created an atmosphere in which we all operate within today. Fear has become the defining moment not only in the cultural conversation but in academic feminism as well. Academic feminism has manifested its fear through the language we hurl at each other to shut out debate, particularly within the discussions surrounding the question “what is a woman.” Beyond the fact that all an academic needs to do to shut down the ideas of another is to call her point of view “essentialist,” essentialist name-calling has come to play the same role within the academy that the accusation “feminist” has come to play for certain right-wing talk show hosts: an unexamined catch-phrase used to condemn, rather than critically examine, any opposing belief or system of thought. The result of this linguistic weapon: fear and silence. The essentialism debates have largely stopped within critical feminist theory, not because questions of identity and difference have been resolved but because the label of essentialist became too shameful or theoretically suspect, for its supporters to advocate for.

Yet the issue of difference and essence remains vital. As de Beauvoir states, woman’s nature has historically been made to be ‘different,’ suspect, defined in Western Civilization in opposition to both Men (the normal) and,

symbolically, to the Divine. It makes sense that academic feminism would take on this issue of essentializing, to demonstrate how the cultural ideals of gendered behavior are constructed in an attempt to dismantle them. Yet rather than stopping there, academics have carried the matter into serious debate, thus granting legitimacy to the idea that a woman is something not quite normal, and in ways that ultimately serve to reinforce the millennium-ages old notion of women's inhumanity, rather than the humanity which feminism seeks to recognize in all areas of a human's life: the theoretical, the social, the political and the legal. As Toril Moi states:

it makes no difference at all whether the woman's difference is taken to be natural or cultural, essential or constructed. All forms of sexual reductionism implicitly deny that a woman is a concrete, embodied human being (of a certain age, nationality, race, class, and with a wholly unique store of experiences) and not just a human being sexed in a particular way. (36)

Instead of continuing to recognize the humanity of women, too much of our culture and too many of the individuals in it cling instead to reassuring standards of gender that reinforce regressive ideals of Symbolic Womanhood. Susan Bordo says: "Sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ageism, while they do not deprive us of agency, remain strongly normalizing within our culture" (299). In other words, as citizens we aren't culturally forced to behave in any particular ways, but if we want to feel and appear "normal," a driving force in most people's

lives,<sup>8</sup> it is easiest to conform to retrograde but apparently universal standards of feminine behavior.

That much of this gendered behavior takes place under the language of “choice”<sup>9</sup> does nothing to minimize the exacting standards of femininity to which women of all ages and races are expected to conform—and from which many women have found an identity that gets them through the day, makes them feel powerful, enables them to fit in as “normal.” We should not trivialize, minimize or dismiss the personal satisfactions and identity reassurance a person receives when she feels she fits in, particularly in a culture dominated by fear. When the cultural discussion becomes not *should* you have plastic surgery, but *which* plastic surgery you should have, we also know that the boundaries of normal have shifted towards more rigorously enforced standards of symbolic Woman. When you can’t take a small pair of scissors or a bottle of water on an airplane for fear someone might kill you, normal is a reassuring place to be.

This description by Patricia Williams states clearly what it feels like to be a woman living in a culture where symbolic Woman dominates:

My life has been characterized by this kind of nagging doubt—by a sense of limit and not belonging, by a sense of being surveilled and measured and always being inadequate. I am always caught up in the question of self-presentation. I am always listening to myself, always watching myself through others’ eyes. (133)

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot describes this tendency in *Middlemarch* when she states, “Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large one might know and avoid them.”

<sup>9</sup> I will examine the rhetoric of “choice” and how it limits and curtails the portrayal of women’s lives, as well as feminist political efficacy, in later chapters.

That Williams, a highly respected African-American lawyer, single mother, feminist, feels this, says to me that women's sense of inadequacy to measure against some cultural ideal cuts across racial and class boundaries.

The famous quote from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, woman*" is the opening line of Volume Two: Lived Experience. In this volume, de Beauvoir traces how women are created in culture, from birth through old age, and in numerous lived situations. Women's lived situation is the crucial fact for de Beauvoir, essential to her study of woman as a "second sex," or the Other. It is vital to her project that she asserts the existence of "woman" as a category, but she simultaneously emphasizes that this existence is contingent to life circumstances, and that the category does not replace the individual. As she states in the Introduction:

Certainly woman like man is a human being; but such an assertion is abstract; the fact is that every concrete human being is always uniquely situated. To reject the notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul, or the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, blacks, or women: this denial is not a liberation for those concerned but an inauthentic flight. (4)

For de Beauvoir, it is not only possible, but indeed necessary, to consider woman from two positions: as a theoretical "Othered" created through cultural construction, and as a human being living in distinct situations. To examine one without the other is impossible. Individual women, like individual Jews and blacks, exist alongside the culture that assigns to them particular roles, functions

and stereotypes. We must be able to focus simultaneously on both aspects of the “Other” if we are to progress.

De Beauvoir’s explanation of the purpose of her work serves as the guiding principle behind this project.

What I will try to describe is how woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences this, what universe she finds herself enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted her. Only then can we understand what problems women—heirs to a weighty past, striving to forge a new future—are faced with. When I use the word “woman” or “feminine,” I obviously refer to no archetype, to no immutable essence... There is no question of expressing eternal truths here, but of describing the common ground from which all singular feminine existence stems. (279)

Similarly, the discussion in the following chapters, while focusing on the “common ground from which all singular feminine existence stems” does not equally contend that this means an inherent essentialism that all women arise from, or are influenced by in similar ways. To use the language of contemporary theory, my argument relies on intersectionality, the idea first articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 that

women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.

But along with intersectionality, or to use deBeauvoir’s term “situated being,” there is a cultural monolith of “Woman” that has a firm grip on our national

psyche, and on the psyche of each individual woman, man and child. Each individual has to contend with and navigate the disruption between the object 'woman' and the subject, the real life, female-sexed person whose subjective existence as agent of her own being is constantly compared to the monolithic object that dominates our collective imaginations and expectations. It would help if the critical lens of academic feminism could give American culture a stronger theoretical language to address this gap.



### CHAPTER III

#### SEXY FEMINISM

In every generation, one slayer is born... because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman ... is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power...is our power.

Buffy, in "Chosen" *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

One of the reasons Americans are not having a cultural conversation about sexism is because, as a group, feminists in the academy have ignored, bypassed or de-legitimized feminism, particularly as it applies to the middle class in the United States and other Western countries. After first tearing down, questioning and diminishing the work of the Second Wave, and giving the "essentialist" kiss of death label to projects that attempt to renew that focus, the academy as a whole has moved on to other projects that have more academic clout. In examining this question, Angela McRobbie discusses the concurrent, and divergent paths taking place in the 1990s between the feminist academy and popular culture. In the academy, "for good theoretical reasons, feminism dismantles itself, by asking questions about foundationalism and universalism, and about representational claims. It queries for example the processes by which feminists speak on behalf of other women" (8). While emphasizing the importance of these theoretical stances, McRobbie is adamant that there has been a cost in terms of having the ability and the language to fight back against

what was simultaneously happening in popular culture where “there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into the home, but instead there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without” (McRobbie 8). When academic feminism lost the ability to claim issues important to all women, it helped pave the way for its own perceived irrelevancy.

According to McRobbie, popular culture is the place where anti-feminist and anti-women backlash is not only most apparent but more importantly where it has its greatest, and most pernicious effect on cultural consciousness. She describes popular culture as the place where “new forms of gender power...are most embedded” (27) and covered up through language appropriated from feminist movement, particularly the vocabulary of personal choice.

As Claire Hemmings discovered when she realized that she had bought into the portrayal of Second Wave feminists as racist essentialists until she actually read their work, so McRobbie describes today’s young women as being subjected to a dual process of “disarticulation and displacement, accompanied by replacement and substitution” (26). Disarticulation, as McRobbie describes it, tells us that there is no longer any need for feminism as its goals have been met. The cultural process of disarticulation “also operates through the widespread dissemination of values which typecast feminism as having been fuelled by anger and hostility to men. This is now understood as embittered, unfeminine and

repugnant” (26). Just as we would instinctively not give a baby boy a pink onesie unless it was as some kind of statement, so many contemporary women flinch from any activity or personal ideology that would get them labeled a “feminist.” The social consequences are seen as just too high a price to pay. According to McRobbie, this makes sense--our cultural values dismiss feminism as an antiquated, hate-filled practice. In this she is echoed by Barbara Tomlinson in her 2010 book *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trope of the Angry Feminist*. Tomlinson lays out how the portrayal of feminists as angry, bitter, man-hating, etc., stops any consideration of feminist argument before it begins and as a rhetorical strategy is used to “create hierarchy and reestablish racialized and gendered authority” (3). For Tomlinson, feminists must reclaim the “larger discursive arena...[so] we can develop countermove to negotiate these effects”(3) Similarly, for academic scholars, our professional values reflect (and help cause) this same reflexive rejection of anything that might hint at the essentialist label.

Beyond co-opting depictions of feminism and feminists to advocate sexist positioning, there are other ways in which the ideology of feminism is twisted to serve retrograde purposes. The language and images of popular culture are shot through with portrayals of women as “empowered.” In this way, actual feminist beliefs and actions, and the concept that feminism is concerned with more than economic justice are, McRobbie states, substituted with a kind of faux-feminism that emphasizes the right to work and personal freedom, particularly sexual

freedom. As she states “this idea of holding onto some mild, and media-friendly version of feminism, has been a consistent feature of the post-feminist backlash, and it becomes more emphatic as it evolves into a substitute for feminism” (31). McRobbie then traces how this disarticulated and substitute “feminism” has, as one of its outcomes, a “re-traditionalisation... [and ] resurgent patriarchalism, in the guise of the seemingly benign power of unfolding social transformation” (46). One consequence, as McRobbie states, is that “the idea of a new feminist political imaginary becomes increasingly inconceivable” (26). As women are incessantly portrayed by pop culture as being empowered with economic and sexual freedom, it gets harder and harder for American culture at large to believe that there is a need for feminism activism and politics at all.

Another consequence, perhaps more insidious, is that the language and expectation of “individual choice” dominates the popular culture landscape. McRobbie (in an argument echoed by Susan Douglas, described below) traces the ways in which this notion of personal empowerment harms women. For one, it adds to the inducement of women to “self-monitor” themselves, to make sure they are making the right choices. In the narratives of women’s lives as portrayed in the films and TV shows of popular culture, as well as the narrative structure of all stories of self-improvement, fictional or “real,” that dominate popular magazines, reality TV, cancer narratives (indeed any narrative of any life story of a contemporary woman), as well as the mantra of Oprah Winfrey in her domination of popular culture, “the individual is compelled to be the kind of

subject who can make right choices” (19). No longer is social stability, corporate responsibility to citizens, the lack of a safety net, racism or sexism or even bad luck allowed to be obstacles, and “there is an evasion in this writing of social and sexual divides, and of the continuing prejudice and discrimination faced by black and Asian women....by these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably” (19). That is, there are no structural, political or economic realities to consider when telling the story of a woman’s life and the “choices” she made; the only consideration is individual, and therefore moralistic, and private.<sup>1</sup>

McRobbie defines the contemporary cultural landscape as “post-feminist,” a term that for her “means a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period” (1). In her use of this term, she differs from media studies professor Susan Douglas. Like McRobbie, Douglas sees the same combination of feminist language being used in popular culture, in conjunction with the language of choice and individual responsibility, to reinforce sexism and diminished social power for women.

Douglas, however, rejects the term post-feminist<sup>2</sup> as a term that, besides having too many definitions, also “suggests that somehow feminism is at the root

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<sup>1</sup> This point will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> The truth is, no one seems to know what “post-feminist” means. The editors of the *Routledge Dictionary of Feminism and Post-feminism* lists numerous possible meanings for post-feminism, including 1) being a

of this when it isn't—it's good, old fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy. It's just much better disguised, in seductive Manolo Blahniks and an Ipex bra" (10). Douglas's term of choice is "enlightened sexism," which she describes as "feminist in its outward appearance (of course you can be or do anything you want) but sexist in its intent (hold on, girls, only up to a certain point)" (10). She finds enlightened sexism to be particularly insidious for in the way it takes feminist language of empowerment and the accomplishments of the women's movement as a given, and "then uses them as permission to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sex objects, bimbos, and hootchie mamas still defined by their appearance and their biological destiny" (Douglas, 10). In Douglas's words, "while enlightened sexism seems to support women's equality, it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism" (10). That is, the cultural language and imagery that shows women to be powerful and in charge, is in actuality in service to stereotypical and supposedly outdated gender roles.

An example of how enlightened sexism made its way through the culture, replacing feminism with a focus on retrograde notions of sexually objectifying women, was satirized in a fake job description from a May 2014 medium.com website. It succinctly, hilariously and in ways shudderingly familiar captures how

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media-driven response to what is commonly seen as "outdated" feminism, 2) a synonym for the backlash documented by Susan Faludi, and 3) a theoretical space which "becomes a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalizing patterns of thought," (50) similar to postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Stating "there is little agreement among those with whom it is popularly associated as to a central canon or agenda," (43) the chapter concludes with the idea that perhaps the term should be replaced by "third wave feminism" so that the term "feminism" does not itself become meaningless.

feminist movement has gone from being about women to how women can be “empowered” by being sexy hot for men:

Feminism is changing—we’re changing with it! Our legendary women’s vertical launched as “Dworkinville” (2001-2007), was renamed “Ladies.biz” after a rollup (2008-2009), then re-rebranded as “Slutbox Junction” (2010-2014). Now we’re just calling the site “Tits” and targeting it to men 15-79. Our last editor (aka Edit Queen) left to work for some magazine with salaries, so we need a new **QUEEN, TITS**. Who is the ideal candidate? He or she is a fifth-to-ninth wave feminist who can speak with authority about the patriarchy while mollifying advertisers and reviewing panties, simultaneously appealing to men but never mentioning the issue of class. If that’s you, send us a photo of you at the beach. (Ford)

Douglas asks us “How do we square the persistence of female inequality with all those images of female power we have seen in the media?” (3) It’s a good question: as Douglas tells us, a majority of people in the United States today think that the goals of feminism have been achieved. And images from mass media, either consciously or unconsciously, help to cement this belief. Yet, despite all of the portrayals of women surgeons, attorneys and police lieutenants that dominate our TV screens, the top jobs for women in 2007 are pretty much the same as they have always been: secretary, retail and sales, elementary school teachers, nurses. Women’s power, in economic terms, hasn’t changed much. These figures tell part of the story:

- One year out of college, women earn 80% of what men make.
- Ten years out of college women earn 69% of what men make.
- 52% of marriage ends in divorce, and after divorce, women and children are much more likely to end up on food stamps, in poverty,

and living in substantially lower economic security than their ex-spouses.

- Women hold 20 (20%) of the 100 seats in the US Senate and 79 (18.2%) of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives. These numbers have increased regularly since 2017, the first year a woman was elected to serve in the House of Representatives, but is still far below women's statistical representation in the population. (Fact Sheet)
- Only 26% of college presidents in the US are women, while 57% of students in colleges and universities are women. (Lapovsky)
- According to a report in *Forbes* magazine, if women continue to increase their representation of college presidents at 1% year, it will take another 48 years before women will make up fifty percent of college presidents. (Lapovsky)

The media gives us fantasies of female power, which we, both personally and culturally, internalize to mean that women have more power than they really do. Meanwhile, as Douglas shows, this casual and inaccurate assumption of economic and professional advancement for women becomes what she describes as embedded feminism, or "The way in which women's achievements, or their desire for achievement, are simply part of the cultural landscape" (9). As shown through examples from popular culture that follow, the assumption that the goals of feminism have all been met are used to deny women autonomy and power even while asserting that they have already won them.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a powerful TV show with a silly name, aired from 1997-2003, first on the WB network and for the last two seasons on the CW. Starring Sarah Michelle Gellar, the show introduced us to "The Slayer," the one girl in all the world who was given super-human strength to fight vampires and



other supernatural evil creatures. The show was a true pop culture phenomenon, its premise based on the concept of a teenage female superhero who was also a blonde, petite, high school cheerleader. The kind of girl who gets killed (or rescued by the hero) in what feels like every other movie and TV show in the genre. As creator Joss Whedon put it:

I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed, and I started feeling bad for her. I thought, you know, it's time she had a chance to take back the night. The idea of Buffy came from just the very simple thought of a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and she's not only ready for him, she trounces him. (Chandler)

The show emphasizes one other unusual feature, not normally present in mass produced entertainment: while Buffy is the superhero, her strength and her survival (most Slayers die early) rest on the gang of loyal friends she surrounds herself with. That is, Buffy's true strength comes from community, rather than one individual's extraordinary power. Her friends—women, men, and the occasional supernatural creature—are presented as individuals (not stereotypes) who bring unique talents to the group, some supernatural but some based on more prosaic qualities (friendship, love, integrity), and all of which are needed for Buffy and their community to survive. They include two women who became a couple in what is commonly perceived to be the first authentic lesbian relationship in TV (Kreck), authentic in that 1) it was not presented as a 'very special episode' but rather one that grew naturally and without much fanfare and 2) it was sexual. And, in an act that ensured this show remains beloved by

academics everywhere, besides loyalty to each other the group survives because of the power of research; when faced with the demon-of-the-week, the first job of the gang is to hit the books. The main male lead on the show is a librarian.

As a pop culture phenomenon, remaining on air for seven years, fans and critics predicted that *Buffy* would be the first in a long line of a new kind of TV heroines and TV show, one that emphasized the power and strength of women whose individuality creates the narrative, rather than women as victims or people only searching for the right man.<sup>3</sup> However, that did not happen. Instead, what became the compelling cultural legacy from *Buffy* wasn't the advent of a new generation of strong heroine and friends; instead, it was the rise of shows focused on supernatural creatures. The women on these new TV shows and movies moved back to their historical place as love-struck, passive creatures. As Joss Whedon stated in an interview with Entertainment Weekly:

The thing about *Buffy* for me is—on a show-by-show basis—are there female characters who are being empowered, who are driving the narrative? The *Twilight* thing and a lot of these franchise attempts coming out, everything rests on what this girl will do, but she's completely passive, or not really knowing what the hell is going on. And that's incredibly frustrating to me because a lot of what's taking on the oeuvre of *Buffy*, is actually a reaction against it. Everything is there — except for the Buffy. A lot of things aimed at the younger kids is just *Choosing Boyfriends: The Movie*. (Hibberd)

Or, as BBC broadcaster Naomi Alderman put it in her December 2013 radio program exploring the legacy of *Buffy*, “[I] believed that the show would lead to

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly romance was important to Buffy and her friends. But when Whedon wanted to give Buffy a relationship that really mattered to her, he created the character of her sister, not a boyfriend.

the creation of a host of other strong and complex female leads - who would inspire young women in the same way Buffy had inspired her. [But] where are all the "daughters of Buffy"? (Alderman) Despite the initial media hype that Buffy signaled a new kind of heroine, complex women with agency are still a rare feature in the pop culture landscape.

One possible "daughter of Buffy," is Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the extremely successful *Hunger Games* book and movie franchise. In her blog devoted to feminist issues, *Coffee At Midnight*, Occidental College Political Science professor Caroline Heldman praises the first movie (which grossed over \$251 million by its second weekend in theaters) for giving us a heroine "who makes it through the movie without a single scene of sexual objectification (despite opportunities to work this into the story). Katniss is a believable, reluctant hero." Heldman contrasts this representation of Katniss Everdeen with the ways in which other female heroines are routinely portrayed in action movies, a portrayal Heldman describes as the fighting fuck toy (FFT):

Fighting fuck toys are hyper-sexualized female protagonists who are able to "kick ass" (and kill) with the best of them. The FFT appears empowered, but her very existence serves the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. In short, the FFT takes female agency, weds it to normalized male violence, and appropriates it for the male gaze. (*Hunger Games*)

The Fighting Fuck Toy is all over popular culture. She is a staple of video games (primarily played by men). She is the "heroine" of popular movies such as *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, *Kill Bill One and Two*, and the *X-Men series*. And, as

Heldman points, out, these types of movies don't always do well at the box office, which makes film executives decide that movies with female action leads can't make money. Heldman points out that the problem with these characters isn't that they are female, it is that they are ridiculous characters, reduced and objectified to being only a sex object, "so reducing a female action hero to an object, even sporadically, diminishes her ability to believably carry a storyline. The FFT might have an enviable swagger and do cool stunts, but she's ultimately a bit of a joke."<sup>4</sup> Film audiences still demand, recognize and respond to believable, complex heroines and heroes; despite the spectacle that occurs in so much of contemporary blockbuster film, audiences still need believable characters to carry the movie.

Heldman is one of the rare examples of a feminist woman academic writing about women's issues in popular culture. Currently an Assistant Professor and the chair of the Political Science department at Occidental College, Heldman has her share of academic pedigree and publications, but much of her most influential work comes through popular culture and social media. She writes a blog and an active Twitter account with over 5000 followers, posting links and raising awareness for a number of women's-focused issues. She wrote the Winter/Spring 2014 cover story for Ms. Magazine, starkly titled "*1 in 5 Women Students on College Campuses Will Experience Sexual Assault.*" In

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<sup>4</sup> The novel idea that women with female protagonists earn real money at the box office was echoed by actress Cate Blanchett in her 2014 Best Actress speech when she decried the idea that "Female films with women at the center are niche experiences. They are not. Audiences want to see them. In fact, they earn money."

2013 she published a Ted X talk entitled, *The Sexy Lie*, examining the sexual objectification of women in popular culture, and the ways in which young women today are oblivious to it.

In the talk, Heldman defines sexual objectification as “the process of representing or treating a person like a sex object, one that serves another’s sexual pleasure” and presents images from contemporary advertisements to show women’s body parts being used to sell items as diverse as furniture, men’s shoes and used cars. She further adds that 96% of the images of sexual objectification are of women and, to return to the theme of my project, cites the consciousness raising and political activism of the 1960s and 70s saying, “we used to have a vocabulary for it [sexual objectification] and the harm on girls and women...[but] even though the culture is more amplified, we don’t have a [current] vocabulary to talk about it...young people have mostly lost the ability to recognize it.” Heldman is insistent that we need a contemporary consciousness raising and activism, designed to increase awareness through language of the sexist environment that still dominates American cultural life.

This lack of vocabulary to identify sexual objectification leads, as Heldman suggests, to an unfortunate consequence of the turn of academic feminism away from the lives of contemporary American women—the loss of the cultural ability to recognize and discuss sexism, and sexual objectification, which is rampant in Western popular culture, frequently disguised in the language of feminism, and goes virtually ignored in the academy (unless, like Heldman, the

feminist academic is willing to write for and speak to a popular audience).

Instead, women's lives, activities, accomplishments and expectations are framed in the language that sounds feminist—choice, powerful, empowered—but, as scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Susan Douglas show and I will demonstrate later in this chapter, are used instead to promote an anti-feminist agenda. As McRobbie states, “we need to consider what has happened to the vocabulary we used to have to discuss sexism in popular culture and the daily lives of individuals in society? How has sexism disappeared from our cultural awareness, even as sexist practices and gendered stereotypes continue to grow?” (19) That is, while we may know that sexism is “out there,” how has it managed to become so normalized in our culture, and so hidden in slogans of women's achievement, that it is rendered both ubiquitous and invisible

Someone you know invites you to a child's birthday party, and you want to get the child a present. So you walk into a ToysRUS/Babies Are US Superstore. It's a brightly lit child's paradise, toys and gadgets beckoning from every aisle. You think about the child—let's say she is a 7 year old girl—and start looking for the gift. As you walk through the store, you become increasingly dissatisfied with the things you see—it's all baking sets and jewelry making kits, but you know that the girl you are buying for also loves science and running as fast as she can. And, if you take a moment to register your own behavior, you notice that you—an academic feminist, a Woman's Studies professor, trained to recognize sexism, are looking down some aisles but completely ignoring others. Why is that? The

aisles you look down are brightly colored, warm, and the boxes all have smiling girls looking out from them, almost all of the girls are thin and white. You realize you have walked past the aisles with building blocks, science kits and Legos, because those aisles are filled with product marketing that just seems rougher—the colors are darker, more ‘masculine.’ The images on the boxes are overwhelmingly of young (white) boys. When you finally do make it to the aisle that has the science kits, you notice they are all boxed in either a “gender neutral” color such as green or yellow, and the pictures on the boxes are mostly boys. If there is a girl, she is quite likely to be Asian.

You realize, as you gaze around the store, that almost every aisle, regardless of the product it sells, is gendered. It doesn’t matter whether the toy has an inherent reason to be gendered or not. Sports equipment, building blocks, puzzles, toolkits. Frequently, there are separate boy and girl versions of the same toy such as with Lego, where the boys have cool Lego kits to choose from: intricately engineered space ships, intergalactic mining tools, a Batmobile, a city street, and many sets designed from exciting movies such as the Star Wars and Raiders of the Lost Ark franchises. We know these sets are for boys because the pictures on the box covers are almost all young boys. They contain intricate set designs and the number of pieces included in each set can range from 600 to over 2000. So what kind of Legos are marketed to girls? There are two. The Legos Friends collection, pink and purple colored sets of the things girls like—you know, a shopping set, a café set, a home set. And the Disney

Princess collection, which consists of different Princess abodes, complete with a Princess and Handsome Prince Lego mini-figures. Not only are the “girl” Legos centered on domestic activity and relationships, the sets are remarkably uncomplicated—200-300 pieces for sets in the same age range as the 600-2000 sets for boys.<sup>5</sup>

And then there is pink.<sup>6</sup> It has become so completely assumed to think that girls like pink, want pink, hold out for pink, that pink dominates the toy industry. In her book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, journalist Peggy Orenstein demonstrates that the ubiquity of the girly color came about after the 1980s, when it was shown that one way to increase profits in toy marketing was to segment the market, so that “where there was once a big group that was simply called “kids,” we now have toddlers, preschoolers, tweens, young adolescents, and older adolescents, each with their own marketing profile” (37). Putting children into gender categories by magnifying the supposed differences between genders increases profits as well. The result of this all-encompassing marketing ploy is that it is now considered natural, or normal, for a girl to want a pink toy, and conversely, that without this color-seal of gender approval, the girl will not want the toy. Orenstein describes attending the annual Toy Fair at New York’s Javits Center, the largest trade show in the toy industry, and seeing not only the

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<sup>5</sup> I know a number of girls who love Legos and they all, unanimously, hate the Friends and Disney sets because they are “boring,” and “too easy.”

<sup>6</sup> Purple has become the new pink, the go-to color for girls who want to be girly but not pink. Think tomboy, or child with feminist mother who is trying not to buy into pink.



somewhat-to-be-expected pink princess and kitchen items but also numerous pink toys that have no reason to be gendered at all, such as:

pink spy kids; pink roll-aboard suitcases; pink cameras; a giant pink plush squid (which, from behind, looked exactly like a giant penis); a pink plush boa constrictor; a pink plus beanstalks (or really *any* push beanstalk); pink rocking horses; pink cowgirl hats...pink gardening gloves; pink electric pianos; pink punching balls; pink gumball machines (with pink gumballs)p; pink kites; pink pool toys; pink golf clubs, sleds tricycles, bicycles, scooters and motorcycles, and even a pink tractor. (34)

Viewed critically from a distance, this domination by pink is completely ridiculous. But in real life, the ubiquity of pink ensures its own survival as a cultural “girl” imperative. That is, color-coded marketing for children is so overwhelming and pervasive that it has become extremely difficult to recognize.

Even the most gender conscious parent falls into purchasing unnecessarily gendered items because it is so hard to escape. You want to buy an outfit for a new baby, let’s say a onesie. Do you get the onesie with the kitten or the truck? The onesie in purple, grey or pink? I can almost 100% guarantee that while you might buy the purple or grey onesie, and you even might go for the cute kitten over the smiling dump truck, you are almost certainly not going to get a boy a pink onesie. While it is often acceptable for a baby girl to be dressed in something a boy would wear, it is still unacceptable for a baby boy to be dressed in something made for a girl. You just wouldn’t buy a pink onesie for a baby boy.

But ask yourself: why not? How could it possibly matter to an infant what color his or her onesie is? Well, the answer as we all know is that someone, somewhere, thinks that little boys will be turned gay if they wear pink clothes. As if the color pink turns on some hidden gay button in male infants, irrevocably cementing him to a life of stereotypical gay male caricature, complete with hyper-feminized, unmasculine thoughts, behavior and sex. And it doesn't matter how stupid you think this is, how much you know that an infant's adult sexuality is not going to be determined by an outfit he wears for the 3 months it will take him to outgrow it. You still wouldn't do it.

Our cultural inability to put baby boys into baby girl clothes is mirrored by the changes in employment that have happened (or not) over the past 50 years. Women now routinely work at jobs once held by men—doctor, lawyer, college professor, accountant—but men are still vastly underrepresented in traditional “woman’s” jobs. As Hanna Rosen states, “Men could move more quickly into new roles now open to them—college graduate, nurse, teacher, full-time father—but for some reason, they hesitate. Personality tests over the decades show men tiptoeing into new territory, while women race into theirs” (Rosen, 9). Rosen’s claims are backed up by research done through the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. According to their April 2012 Fact Sheet, “The gender wage gap and occupational segregation...are persistent features of the U.S. labor market. Only four of the 20 most common occupations for men and the 20 most common occupations for women overlap” (The Gender Wage Gap). This report further

states that women are moving—slowly—into men’s work. Men are not, generally, moving into traditionally women’s fields.<sup>7</sup> From baby clothes to career choices, it is still not acceptable for boys and men to be associated with something a female might do.

There’s another consequence to the pervasiveness of pink for “girl” toys and the refusal of boys (and their parents) to have boys come into any contact with a pink item. As Peggy Orenstein notes, “it also discourages the possibility of cross-sex friendship. Could you share your Pink Glam Magic 8 ball with a pal who happened to be a boy?” (50). The gendering of toys separates boys and girls from each other at a time when they are otherwise likely to develop friendship with members of the opposite sex.

To even attempt to buy non-sexist items for a child takes so much energy and concentration it is often just easier to go with the flow, blank out and get the thing that the store (and quite often the child involved) wants you to get. As sociologist Philip Manning states,

In our daily life we often act on autopilot: we comply with a set of implicit instructions that govern our behavior. Social life is patterned because we often choose to follow these instructions and thereby make the world predictable. Predictability is an astonishing collective accomplishment. (3)

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<sup>7</sup> An exception to this appears to be nursing. According to the 2013 US Census Report “Men In Nursing Occupations,” About 2.7 percent of registered nurses were men in 1970 compared with 9.6 percent in 2011. Men’s representation among licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses grew from 3.9 percent in 1970 to 8.1 percent in 2011.” However, the report goes on to add that while men comprise the smaller number of nurses, they also earn more money, on average \$60,700 per year, while women nurses, comprising 91% of the nursing population, earn on average \$51,100. [http://www.census.gov/people/io/files/Men\\_in\\_Nursing\\_Occupations.pdf](http://www.census.gov/people/io/files/Men_in_Nursing_Occupations.pdf)

As we attempt to navigate this post 9/11 world, a world in which first graders are murdered at school, where teenagers going to a late night movie are gunned down in the theater, where we can't bring a half-full bottle of shampoo in our carry-on luggage when boarding a plane, predictable becomes more and more meaningful. We want the world to be predictable so that we can feel safe.

Interestingly, Orenstein states, "the current princess craze took off right around the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and continued to rise through the recession" (28) and, mirroring Manning's point about predictability, goes on to describe our cultural embrace of the Disney Princess as a reaction of adults to an unstable world. She links this with previous historical incarnations of the princess obsession, including the original fairy tales coming out of a medieval European culture overwhelmed by social and economic change, and America's fascination with Shirley Temple during the Great Depression. Echoing the claims of Susan Faludi that our post 9/11 culture has embraced traditional, stereotypical norms of active male and weak female in order to make ourselves feel safe, Orenstein also shows that in times of social chaos and upheaval, our culture seems to cling to entrenched ideas of female innocence and purity.

When we add the pervasiveness of gender stereotyping on top of this desire for predictability, gender becomes even more difficult to see. In her essay "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender," Judith Lorber states, "Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to

pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous” (68). Gender construction through the banal details of daily life is only noticeable when expectations are ruptured. The rest of the time it is invisible, and thus enters the realm of “natural,” or “common sense.”

We justify this to ourselves by thinking “just this once,” or, “I know better” (and again, the “I know better so it’s ok” mantra is also used in much of the sexism rampant in adult popular culture as well, such as I know this reality show is portraying women as cat-fighting idiots, but since I know better, I can watch it as entertainment and it’s ok). Plus, let’s face it, we’re tired. As Orenstein states, “There is already so much to be vigilant about...So if a spa birthday party would make your six year old happy (and get her to leave you alone) really, what is the big deal?”(6). In actuality, it really is a big deal: Orenstein goes on to cite statistics from the American Psychological Association showing that girly-girl culture increases our daughters risk for “depression, eating disorders, distorted body image, risky sexual behavior” (6). Our girls pay a huge penalty when we let early childhood sexism slide. But, when it is as pervasive as it is, asking a parent to consciously fight against sexist objectification in childhood culture becomes near impossible.

In what seems like another context but is actually part of the same system, advertisements in women’s magazines assume a contemporary reader who is both grounded in ideas of feminist equality but also too overwhelmed to take

action against sexism and racism. As Angela McRobbie puts it, contemporary advertisements portray women as empowered, discerning consumers, fully qualified to correctly choose among competing offers. She goes on to add that “This rhetoric of the confident female consumer forecloses on the re-emergence of feminism in favour of apathy and de-politisation. The world of popular culture...no longer needs to pay any attention whatsoever to those who are concerned with sexual or racial discrimination since they have been silenced or disempowered” (43). The woman dressed only in her underwear in a car advertisement, simultaneously holding a pouting, sexy pose and asserting her own empowerment to do so, is directly connected to the domination of separately gendered toys and color-coded clothing that pervades children’s retail.

Sexism in children’s clothes, toys and activities has become so rampant that it is invisible. Its very ubiquity promotes and encourages its invisibility, which then promotes and encourages sexism and gendered separateness as “natural” events that are the cultural norm. These dynamics then get repeated over and over again, throughout American culture, until gendered stratification becomes firmly cemented in popular consciousness, and we don’t even notice when it doesn’t make any sense. For example, I recently took my daughter to the doctor, and when we left she wanted a sticker that the office gives out to kids. There were two boxes of stickers available, one labeled *Boys*, the other *Girls*. The stickers in each box were the same.

It is obvious that gendered stereotypes have become a foundation of not only childhood but our cultural assumptions of how people are and how they should behave when they are adults. How is it that, despite the legal gains of feminism, these assumptions continue to dominate cultural consciousness? What happened to the *Free To Be You And Me* promise of gender egalitarianism? Most importantly, why don't we have a cultural language to discuss this problem?

Embedded feminism makes us think that the goals of the women's movement have been met, that women have real equality and there is nothing to fight for anymore. Therefore, the cultural assumption goes, women's real power therefore is found "around the issues of sexual display and rampant consumerism" (8). Women can focus on being hot sexual objects of desire because everything else is taken care of. Embedded feminism, along with its concurrent slogan of "girl power" tells us that women have power and equality when they really don't. It changes the meaning of power from economic freedom back to where female power has historically been found—female sexuality. Or, as my daughter asked me when she was nine years old, "Mommy, am I hot?"<sup>8</sup>

In this, embedded feminism and what Douglas calls the rise of enlightened sexism, are sibling to Susan Faludi's articulation of "Backlash," or "the rising pressure to halt, and even reverse, women's quest for...equality" (10). When she originally published this seminal text, Faludi was referring to the backlash of

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<sup>8</sup> Now, at age twelve, strong, healthy, active and within all the normal height and weight averages for her age, she asks me if she is fat. But that's another chapter.

the 1980s that came after the gains of the Second Wave. But her comments are equally valid to the backlash we are in today, when she states that:

Certainly hostility to female independence has always been with us. But if fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture, it is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically. And it is these episodes of resurgence, such as the one we face now, that can accurately be termed “backlashes” to women’s advancement (*Backlash* 10).

The backlash period we are currently in, coming out of stereotypical gendered norms arising from economic and security fears, combined with an absence of meaningful critical, cultural language to articulate this, is slightly different from the backlash Faludi discussed when her book was originally published in 1991. Then, feminism was blamed for everything, including infertility, alcoholism, difficult relationships with men, bad complexions and pretty much every other aspect of women’s lives, serious or trivial. Famously, Faludi took the cultural myth that “a woman over 40 was more likely to be killed by a terrorist than get married” and showed how false it was. In our contemporary moment, the backlash is different. Now power for women is portrayed as directly connected to how “hot” you are, or generated from the stuff you have. As Douglas and McRobbie delineate, the unstated assumption is now that everything is great for women, it’s ok to bring back sexist stereotypes of men and women because for women, true power comes from getting men to lust after you and other women to envy you.



Using Douglas's definition that enlightened sexism is feminist in its outward appearance but sexist in its intent, let's go back to what popular culture presents to us. This past October,<sup>9</sup> I went on the Wal-Mart website and looked at their offerings of Halloween costumes for girls. On the one hand, I saw a variety of options. Girls could choose from such diverse and seemingly non-gendered options as a pumpkin, a pirate, a skeleton as well as the more traditional, "girly" choices of a kitten or Snow White. On the other hand, for every single one of these costumes, the bottom half of the costume was a short skirt. You might ask—why does a pumpkin wear a skirt? Or a skeleton? Wouldn't a short skirt get in the way of a pirate doing her job? Or, more globally: Halloween occurs at night, at the end of October. In most parts of the country it's cold, and kids are running around high on candy and excitement. Shouldn't they have pants on? Snow White was the only one of the costume choices where a skirt was legitimately called for, but while in the movie her skirt was long, in the costume it too was short.<sup>10</sup>

According to Douglas, enlightened feminism co-opts feminism by saying that its goals have been achieved, so feminism should be repudiated because feminists are old-fashioned, man hating, humorless women who don't like sex. Enlightened sexism uses the language of feminism to convince women to

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<sup>9</sup> October 2013

<sup>10</sup> In case you were wondering, it's not any better for adults. As Miranda says in an episode of *Sex and The City* while Halloween shopping for herself, "The only two Halloween costumes for women are 'witch' and 'sexy kitten.'"

behave in sexist ways, and to excuse sexism in men because they are kind of idiotic and do what women want. Enlightened sexism encourages women to dress as sexily as possible. It encourages young girls to do the same. And it says that looking like this is a source of power for women. Enlightened Sexism overstates women's accomplishments—all those TV shows with women lawyers, doctors, surgeons—and reinforces the idea that women must be nice and hot. Finally, enlightened sexism does not tell us that these attitudes are dangerous, ignore obvious social realities and are at odds with reality.

In 2013, political commentator Zerlina Maxwell went on *The Sean Hannity Show* to discuss gun control. She ended up talking about rape, and made the point that instead of teaching women to arm themselves (and therefore holding them accountable if they get raped and don't defend themselves), our culture should teach men not to rape. For making this suggestion, she received numerous horrific death and rape threats. These included, from Twitter: "*Nigger! I hope you get raped and your throat slit! May be then you understand why white women have to be armed! DIE BITCH*" And "*You need to be gang raped to you get some common sense. You stupid bitch*" (Marshall).

Also in 2013, the Bank of England redesigned its bank notes, and at the urging of feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez that they include a woman on at least one of the new designs, put Jane Austen on the ten-pound note. For making this suggestion Criado-Perez also received rape threats, including "*If*

*your friends survived rape they weren't raped properly," and "HIDE YO KIDS I BE RAPING ALL YALL UP IN HERE"* (Philipson).

Or, to take this week's example:<sup>11</sup> the *New York Times Magazine* cover story on Wendy Davis, the Texas state delegate who is running for governor. Ms. Davis entered national attention in the summer of 2013 when she filibustered for 11 hours on the Texas bill to stop abortions. She is now running for governor. The *NYT* cover story is titled "Can Wendy Davis Have It All?" As Jessica Valenti states (tweet, Feb. 12) it "spends approx 900 words investigating how many days EXACTLY did she spend w/her kids during law school." To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever written a profile about an important male politician and spent the vast part of the story on how he managed child care while he moved up his chosen career.

This is also the week that *Sports Illustrated* put Barbie on the cover of its yearly Swimsuit Edition, thus making inescapable the fact that

this issue of *Sports Illustrated* is entirely about the objectification of the female form. It's about breasts, rear ends, long legs and tiny waists — the proportions of which would actually cause a real woman to topple over..... mak[ing] no distinction between the female body and a plastic doll.  
(Martin)

Although these events I have discussed have occurred recently, they are similar to representations of and responses to women that were also current twenty, forty, sixty years ago. As a culture, we choose to overlook and ignore

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<sup>11</sup> Feb 16 2014

these things, or bury them in the “enlightened sexism” approach that Douglas delineates. But rather than being things we accept because we “know better,” and despite the economic gains women have made, these sexist attitudes still limit, constrain and indeed endanger the lives of real women.

The writers and activists of the Second Wave knew this. Frances M. Beal, New York Coordinator for the SNCC Black Women’s Liberation Committee wrote a powerful essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” published in the 1970 anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*. In this essay, Beal asserts that “neither the black man nor the black woman understood the true nature of the forces working upon them. Many black women tended to accept the capitalist evaluation of manhood and womanhood” (341). Beal goes on to state that “The black community and black women especially must begin raising questions about the kind of society we wish to see established. We must note the ways in which capitalism oppresses us and then move to create institutions that will eliminate these destructive influences” (351). Beal was speaking to and about black women and goes on to explain the specific cultural ideologies that hold back the black woman, and beyond that the black man, but in her call that women look at the forces at work in systems of oppression and sexism, her argument transcends racial lines. We don’t talk today about women in America being oppressed: if we use the term at all, it is in discussions of women in cultures who are not allowed access to the tools of civilization that the Western feminist movement won, such as voting rights, the ability to work, to be recognized legally

as a free and independent human with all the rights and privileges of citizenship that a man has. American, and by extension Western contemporary oppression, is more subtle—it operates through cultural values reflected in invisible codes of behavior made manifest and normalized in popular culture, rather than institutionalized laws.

In her forward to her collection of essays *Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Adrienne Rich discusses the battle for the ERA, linking forces that oppose the ERA as similar to those which opposed women's suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She lists these forces as including the following:

powerful industrial interests, desiring to keep a cheap labor pool of women or threatened by women's economic independence; the networks of communication which draw advertising revenue from those interests; the erasure of women's political and historic past which makes each new generation of feminists appear as an abnormal excrescence on the fact of time; trivialization of the issue itself, sometimes even by its advocates when they fail to connect it with the deeper issues on which twentieth-century women are engaged in our particular moment of feminist history. (9-10)

These same interests are fully active today, working to ensure the continued presence of entrenched sexism and sexist cultural values in our cultural consciousness and individual psyches. The consequences are real. In 1987, June Jordan described the prevailing attitudes towards women in America in her essay "Don't You Talk About My Momma, in words that would need only slight updating to be equally relevant today:

This is a society that hates women and that thinks we are replaceable/we are dispensable, ridiculous, irksome facts of life aptly described as “female-headed,” for example. American social and economic hatred of women means that any work primarily identified as women’s work will be poorly paid, if at all. Any work open to women will be poorly paid, at best, in comparison to work open to men. Any work done by women will receive a maximum of 64 cents on the dollar [the 2014 figure is 72 cents] compared to the same work done by men... The problem, clearly, does not originate with women, in general, or Black women, specifically, who, whether it’s hard or whether it’s virtually impossible, nevertheless keep things together. Our hardships follow from the uncivilized political and economic status enjoined upon women and children in our country. (371)

Jordan clearly links social hatred of women with a diminished economic and political reality for women and children. While conditions have improved since 1987 when she wrote this essay, they have not improved all that much. As discussed earlier in this chapter, women’s economic position has not changed much in the past twenty years. Neither has the social hatred of women. The entrenched sexist, stereotypes of femininity, and the invisible ubiquity of pronounced gender norms that serve to define a person from the moment he or she is first born, is cementing a culture that still perceives women as objects and “Other,” even as it outwardly celebrates their independence. And, despite terms such as Douglas’s “Enlightened Sexism” that academic feminists could be grappling with to, there is little coming from the academy to acknowledge this, look for remedies, articulate for people caught up in their daily life what is happening and how to change it.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BODY

She had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked...Telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define.

Virginia Woolf, *Professions for Women* (in *Death of A Moth*)

In a 2005 episode titled “The End of the World” of the long running British TV show *Dr. Who*, the villain-of-the-week is a talking piece of skin stretched on a frame and wheeled around by servants. This is Cassandra, the last living human, who has had 708 plastic surgery operations that have reduced her to being nothing but skin, eyes and a mouth, completely dependent on others. She is proud—indeed, quite vain—of the way she looks and when she is introduced to a group of people she says, “Oh now, don't stare. I know. I know. It's shocking, isn't it? I've had my chin completely taken away. And look at the difference! Look how thin I am. Thin and dainty.”

Cassandra has agency—she is a clever villain with a lively wit, as well as an immensely rich woman who almost gets away with murder. But she is also a statement on women's preoccupation with their bodies, an example of the

popular old saying “you can never be too rich or too thin,” taken to its logical, and completely ridiculous, conclusion.

To say that throughout most of recorded history, women’s bodies have been monitored, scrutinized, objectified, and considered to belong to the public—or to their fathers and husbands, depending on the historical moment— and the actions of the body directly connected to a verdict on a woman’s morality, is to utter a comment so commonplace as to be almost irrelevant. To say that the self-scrutiny that individual women turn on themselves is equally relentless in its judgment is similarly banal. Yet why? With all the gains feminism has made in women’s economic and political equality, why with all the theorizing about the differences between sex and gender, are women’s bodies as much a commodity, and cultural marker for morality, as they ever were?

Theorizing the body in academic feminist terms hasn’t made a difference in actual bodies still being commodified, still relentlessly critiqued, still imperfect and always under surveillance. Women’s bodies reduces the idea of essentialism to its most basic—how much of a woman’s identity is her physicality?— whether one considers only a vagina, breasts, and reproductive organs a marker of her essential nature, or adds culturally conceived notions of beauty on top. The second question to add to this is: if we say that a woman has a body, what claims are we making on top of that? How quickly and in what ways does claiming that women have women’s bodies turn into “because women have women’s bodies, therefore XXX?” That is, how closely connected is the



statement women have women's bodies to the political stance that their women's bodies mean certain things, or require certain actions from themselves and/or the state? The academy has discussed, argued and ripped itself apart to cover the fact (?) that women have bodies and what those bodies mean. And yet, out in culture, the body is just as objectified as it ever was—or maybe even worse.

One of the ways in which the academy theorizes the woman's body is through the distinction between sex and gender. The first well-known instance of this distinction occurs in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft and first published in 1792.<sup>1</sup> In it, Wollstonecraft decries the ways women are educated following theories taken from men who think of "females rather as women than human creatures...[in which they] are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as part of the human species" (93-94).

Wollstonecraft herself explains that she will treat women "like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone" (95), adding that women are "much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence" (96). The education women received, the "mistaken notions of female elegance" that she argues against, all created a culture in which women who wanted to receive protection from men, who held all the power, had to submit to becoming feminine, to be trained to "slavish dependence...weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility,

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<sup>1</sup> The editors of *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)* refer to this Wollstonecraft's argument as "the first published writer to confront the issue of socialized gender roles." (Ritchie and Ronald, 92)

and sweet docility of manners” (95). Wollstonecraft’s purpose in this groundbreaking text was to break up the connection between women’s biological sex and the “feminine” gendered expectations of what their biology supposedly meant, in order for women to reach their full, human potential.

Wollstonecraft’s argument that women are human beings educated to gender norms was echoed in America in the nineteenth century by women such as Margaret Fuller, Sarah Grimke and Sojourner Truth, whose “Ain’t I A Woman” speech delineated not only the gender constructs placed on white women of her time, but their racialized nature as well. More to the point of this project, Truth also uses the concrete fact of her physical body to dispute the discrepancy between racial and gender norms when she says

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place (*and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked*), and aren’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (*And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power.*) (Truth 144-145)

I love the image of Truth, six feet tall and standing in front of an audience at the Women’s Rights Convention of 1851, demanding that the crowd “Look at me! Look at my arm!” She goes on to list the physical trials she has endured, including plowing, planting, enduring whippings and giving birth to 13 children, then having almost all of them sold away from her. The power of Truth’s argument comes in part from her rhetoric, the way she challenges conventional

notions of womanhood to demand that gendered and racial conventions take into account all females, not just white, upper and middle class women. But it is the forcing of her body onto the audience (what the editors of *Available Means* describes as Truth “integrat[ing] the reality of her body into her argument” (Ronald & Ritchie 144) that gives her statement such power. For Truth, her concrete body and the physical suffering it has endured is a powerful fact that attests to the truth of her intellectual argument. The gender norms of her day may be constructed so as to leave out many women, but her body is testament to the falseness of those norms, the way they lie and misrepresent what women are capable of. We know culturally constructed ideas of “womanhood” are false because the physical reality of Truth’s body proves them false. Truth’s reliance on her own body to disrupt concepts of womanhood stands in powerful response to contemporary poststructuralist arguments that the body (what they tend to refer to as “sex”) is as culturally constructed as the body and the poststructuralist tendency to “deny that there are biological facts independent of our social and political norms” (Moi 42). That is, it is not necessary to dispute the existence of biology in order to assert that women are not bound to gendered expectations arising from that biology.

Audre Lorde understood that the physical body exists in urgent ways that requires language to be contingent with the body, that theory and practice must work together, that gender and sex are not rigidly divided and separate cultural entities. In her speech “The Transformation of Silence into Language and

Action,” given at the 1977 MLA conference, she draws upon her physical experiences of breast cancer, as well as being a black lesbian, to demand that that

for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.(302)

Lorde goes on to say that “we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (304). I don’t know what Lorde made of the sex/gender distinction in itself, but this powerful and influential essay she clearly shows that linking women’s physical nature to language and by extension theory is essential to women’s survival in the world. As she states “we [Black women] were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which is also the source of our strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak” (303).<sup>2</sup> Survival means speaking the truth.

For activists like Truth and Lorde, a woman’s body is a given truth that must be reckoned with as we attempt to dismantle cultural constructions of what

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<sup>2</sup> Other Second Wave feminists who insist the physical body is vital to the feminist project includes Gloria Anzaldua.

it means to be a woman and who gets to qualify. In our contemporary understanding, theorists have separated the woman's body and the cultural meanings attached to it into terminologies of 'sex' and 'gender.' In this delineation, 'sex' tends to refer to biology and 'gender' tends to refer to cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. This is not a fixed, formal definition of the two, and many variations on this basic formulation exists. But it is safe to say that the trope of the sex/gender distinction has become a commonplace in feminist theorizing. The textbook *Women's Voices/Feminist Visions*, by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, now in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition and used in Introduction to Women's Studies courses across the country, offers a typical statement on gender on the very first page of the book:

Gender concerns what it means to be a woman or a man in society. Gender involves the way society creates, patterns, and rewards our understandings of femininity and masculinity. In other words, gender can be defined as the way society organizes understandings of sexual difference. Women's studies explores our gendered existence: how we perform femininity and masculinity and how this interacts with other aspects of our identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. (1)

This description is representative of the way gender is discussed in the academy. Gender is a social creation, and it intersects with other identity markers. There's nothing "wrong" with this definition, and a good deal right; I use it myself in the women's studies courses I teach. But its ubiquity makes me nervous; by focusing relentlessly on the social construction of gender are we losing the theoretical confidence to acknowledge the physical body as well?

The use of the word “perform” is significant as a marker of the distinction. *Women’s studies explores our gendered existence: how we perform femininity and masculinity.* This statement of what the discipline of Women’s Studies seeks to do, its mission statement, is lifted directly from the work of Judith Butler. Her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, which articulated the performance aspect of gender, reshaped feminist theory. But Butler didn’t stop with considering gender as a social construct. She pushed the theory into arguing that sex (or the body) is also culturally created. Or, as she says, “perhaps this construct called sex is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (*Gender Trouble* 7). Butler’s emphasis on the performance aspects of sex and gender were important in breaking the historical connection between the two used for millennium to justify women’s treatment as second class citizens; however, the performance aspect of “sex,” which she intended as speculation (and directly argues against as a tool for political efficacy as I will show below), has been taken as secular gospel for academic feminists.

The impact Judith Butler has had on contemporary feminist theory is so pervasive, that I would claim it just about rivals the impact of the entire Second Wave on the ways in which feminism is discussed within the academy. In fact, I believe that because her influence and the ‘sanctity’ of her reputation is so strong, and because she is so difficult to read, that many feminist academics are in some ways afraid of criticizing her. Her difficulty makes it hard for many to

trust their own interpretations of what they've read. I think this can mystify some of her readers into beliefs about her work, and this self-knowledge of being on shaky intellectual ground (one that everyone else gives the appearance of being able to understand fully) encourages the fear that to criticize her will lead to being seen as an essentialist, as believing somehow in biological determinism. Also, because Butler's work is so strongly based in queer and transgender theory, and she has done so much in those areas to advance them in the academy, there appears to be a lingering fear that to argue against some of her theories is to somehow support homophobia, transphobia and biological determinism. In the same way, I might add, that I believe the reason contemporary academics turn against Second Wave theorists is the fear that to cite their contributions is to risk being labeled essentialist and/or racist.

To turn again to *Women's Voices/Feminist Visions*, the introductory Women's Studies text book: in their discussion of biology they fully replicate Butler's theories as an absolute given:<sup>3</sup>

while biology may imply some basic physiological facts, culture gives meaning to these in such a way that we must question whether biology can exist except within the society that gives it meaning in the first place. This implies that sex, in terms of raw male or female, is already gendered by the culture within which these physiological facts of biology exist. In other words, although many people make a distinction between biological sex (female/male) and learned gender (feminine/masculine), it is really impossible to speak of a fixed biological sex category outside of the sense that a culture makes of that category. (106)

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, without citing Butler, implying that this interpretation of Butler's theories have become as unthinkingly assimilated into feminist theory as have the belief that Second Wave theorists were racist and classist.

The authors go on to use the classic example drawn on by almost everyone who takes biology to be culturally constructed: the intersex baby ( a child born with sex characteristics of male and female biology) and the rush its parents have historically undertaken to get its gender labeled, and its biology “fixed” to line up with the chosen gender. According to this theory, since the intersex baby is born with indeterminate genitalia, the body itself must be indeterminate.

The problem with this example is that the intersex baby is not the norm: the fact that most humans are born with a clear biologically-identified physical body that fits into clearly identifiable male or female categories is tossed aside, in order to draw on a statistically significantly smaller population to prove a point about the larger whole. It’s a faulty syllogism:

Men and women have separate biologically sexed bodies.  
The intersex person contains both male and female biology.  
Therefore, the male and female bodies do not exist.

This makes no sense.

Toril Moi discusses the inherent fallacy in relying on the exception to prove the norm does not exist when she states that “the assumption [by poststructuralists] is always that if only we would become aware of exceptions and hard cases, then we would necessarily be led to question the very meaning of our concepts, politically as well as theoretically” (43). For Moi, and for myself, the end result of this mode of thinking would be to deny words of any meaning whatsoever—“But if political oppression is taken to follow from the fact that every



concept draws a boundary, and thus necessarily excludes something—i.e. from the very fact that words have a meaning and that meaning is normative—then it becomes difficult to see what political alternative poststructuralist intend to propose” (43-44). To return to the intersex baby: yes, sometimes biology is indeterminate. But to affirm this as fact does not mean that the biologically determinant body does not exist. As a culture, to make concrete, political statements, we need to draw on a concrete, shared meaning. We need to open up this shared meaning to include the biologically indeterminate body, but we also need to recognize that the biologically determinate body, the “male” and “female” is a reality as well. Then, politically, using that shared reality, we can enlarge, break down and expand the cultural meanings we give to the female body.

Sojourner Truth drew on this concrete, shared meaning when she used her own body to assert her right to a woman’s status, as a physical reality congruent with her refusal of gender and racial norms. She used her body to show how wrong those norms were. But her use of the body, unlike the intersex example used to refute biology, made sense. Her body was already exactly like the bodies of the white women in the audience; only the color was different.<sup>4</sup> To use Moi’s terminology, Truth was saying that her inclusion in the meaning of the word woman was missing; the boundary of that circle needed to be opened up to include women like her. The intersex baby example, on the other hand, isn’t

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<sup>4</sup> I know that to say “just the color” sounds politically naïve. I don’t mean that at all.

used to say that maybe we should reconsider biology, and our strict insistence on dualism, on assigning animals to male or female categories. That maybe we should include a third category. Then the syllogism would be:

Men and women have separate biologically sexed bodies.  
The intersex human contains both male and female biology.  
Therefore, there is a third category of the human body.

That would make sense. Instead, the intersex baby example is used to argue against biology at all, despite the fact that many people fall easily, recognizably into a biological category. What kind of political, concrete strategies and meanings can we make with that?

Maybe the poststructuralists don't intend to propose a political strategy. Maybe they are working strictly in the language of the theoretical, where all accepted words and concepts need to be pushed to the limits of their assumptions. That is an absolutely valid decision, and one worthy of critical inquiry. But for a discipline like Women's Studies, grounded in concrete pragmatism as well as theory, to rely heavily on concepts so purely theoretical and speculative in their nature, is wrong. Butler is an intriguing and important theorist, well worth our consideration. She is not, however, to be slavishly, uncritically, even fearfully followed. Her theoretical work should not be so extraordinarily influential as to dominate feminist theorizing and introductory women's studies classes. And people who question and refute her thinking should not be in fear of labeling from the academy. As Moi states:

Butler ends up implying that most past and contemporary feminists...and just about all medical researches and biologists are sexist oppressors, just because they accept that there are biological bases for the categorization of human beings into two sexes...[This] widespread tendency to criticize anyone who thinks that biological facts exist for their 'essentialism' or 'biologism' is best understood as a recoil from the thought that biological facts can ground social values. Instead of denying that biological facts ground any such thing...poststructuralists prefer to deny that there are biological facts independent of our social and political norms. ...This is obviously absurd. To avoid biological determinism all we need to do is to deny that biological facts justify social values. (41-42)

Toril Moi takes on Butler, appreciating what she has done but calling into question her theories about the body. In her essay *What is a Woman*, Moi states that "in contemporary feminist theory so much energy is spent keeping the specter of biologically based essentialism at bay that it is easy to forget that generalizations about gender may be just as oppressive as generalizations about sex" (7). She goes on to look at the theoretical practices of poststructuralists in general, and Judith Butler in particular, when she states that "the theoretical machinery they bring to bear on the question of sex and gender generates a panoply of new theoretical problems that poststructuralists feel compelled to resolve" (31). That is, poststructuralist work, while valuable and intriguing as a line of theoretical investigation, is ultimately interested in following its own chain of theoretical reasoning.

Judith Butler is a philosopher and comes from the point of view and rigor of that branch of the academy. It is not that one cannot be both a philosopher and a feminist—of course one can, and I have no doubt that Butler and other poststructuralists are the dedicated feminists they claim to be. When she asks, in

“Contingent Formations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,”

“Through what exclusions has the feminist subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the “integrity” and the “unity” of the feminist ‘we’”? (640), she is asking a vitally important question. But Butler herself goes on to state “Within feminism, it seems as if there is some political necessity to speak as and for *women*, and I would not contest that necessity” (640).

Despite this, it seems that Butler’s fundamental goal is to keep the “multiple significations (641) of the term “woman” open to ongoing argument and discussion, and this is ultimately a theoretical position, valuable in its own right but not necessarily the strongest base for feminist activism, or for creating language to address the sexism and other issues facing contemporary women. It also is of little help untangling the sex/gender discussion.

Toril Moi tells us that the “sex/gender distinction was first invented by medical personnel working with transsexuals and intersexed persons. The distinction emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s in response to the new medical technologies developed after World War II” (115). She adds that she does not find it a particularly useful distinction in theorizing women for “The concepts sex and gender represent two different ways of thinking about sexual difference. They do not pretend to explain class, race, or nationality, or anything else. When it comes to thinking about what a woman is, therefore, the sex/gender distinction is woefully inadequate” (35). That is, the sex/gender distinction focuses all critical attention to a woman’s sexually constructed self, leaving out all other

considerations of a woman's human dimensions. Here, Moi is echoed by Teresa DeLauretis in her article "Feminism and Its Differences," who argues for "a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also...race, class, ethnicity and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representations" (29). For de Lauretis as well as for Moi, this is the project of feminist theory, and it is both theoretically and pragmatically larger than the sex/gender divisions that have found such academic currency.<sup>5</sup> For, as Moi states, "Whether I consider a woman to be the sum of sex plus gender, to be nothing but sex, or nothing but gender, I reduce her to her sexual difference. Such reductionism is the antithesis of everything feminism ought to stand for" (35). If feminist theory ultimately reduces women to being a product of their sexual difference, it is ultimately not feminist at all.

Ultimately, Moi finds the sex/gender distinction meaningless. In this she mirrors Butler (although coming at it from a different position) and her argument that both sex and gender are culturally constructed and thus indistinguishable from each other. Intriguingly, this insistence on the ultimate falseness of the sex/gender divide also mirrors Second Wave legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon who, in a note to her article "Not A Moral Issue" *states* that:

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<sup>5</sup> More recently, in 2008 Susan Fraiman wrote "Gender is never irrelevant, yet it may also at times be true that the plight of a particular group of women is better understood and combated by foregrounding structural racism, foreign occupation, or corporatization, rather than sexism" (45).

Much has been made of the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is thought the more biological, gender the more social. The relation of sexuality to each varies....Since I think that the importance of biology to the condition of women is the social meaning attributed to it, biology *is* its social meaning for the purposes of analyzing the inequality of the sexes, a political condition. I therefore tend to use sex and gender relatively interchangeably.

These three widely influential feminist theorists who seem to be at odds with each other over the sex/gender/body question demonstrate the conflicting attention to the question of sex and gender and come to remarkably similar conclusions. They each, through their own line of reasoning, come to the conclusion that this is ultimately a meaningless distinction. Butler's concern is primarily with pushing theory to its limits—but even she adds, at the conclusion of her essay “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution” that “it is primarily political interests which create the social phenomena of gender itself” (529) and goes on to approvingly quote Gayatri Spivak and her argument “that feminists need to rely on an operational essentialism, a false ontology of women as a universal in order to advance a feminist political program” (529). MacKinnon's concern is with the everyday and the practical: how and why to change the laws that govern pornography and thus improve the lives and status of concrete, individual women in concrete, individual situations. And Moi's concern seems to be a bridge between the two—how to use theory to pragmatic use. And yet, at a fundamental level, they are all in agreement that the sex and gender distinction, in such prominence in feminist theory and women's studies classrooms today, is either non-existent or not actually very important, that the categories of sex and

gender come out of the politics of social dominance and are thus tied into the goals and strategies of patriarchy, and that this distinction is a patently non-useful way to achieve the political goals of feminism.

Moi's approach, as she attempts to find a way to think through the theoretical issue of a woman's body in ways that are concretely identifiable and useful to the individual contemporary women, develops Simone deBeauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex* that the body is a situation, which

Is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman's body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom. For Beauvoir, our freedom is not absolute, but situated. Other situations as well as our particular lived experience will influence our projects, which in turn will shape our experience of the body. In this way, each woman's experience of her body is bound up with her projects in the world. There are innumerable different ways of living with one's specific bodily potential as a woman. I may devote myself to mountain climbing, become a ballet dancer, a model, a nurse or a nun. I may have lots of sexual relations or none at all, have five children or none, or I may discover that such choices are not mine to make. (66)

That is to say, the body is both sex and gender, seen, acted and imposed upon, but also not a defining category of its own. It is a situation, part of the situation in which any given human finds herself living. It is concrete and symbolic, both at once.

Moi instead wants to talk about bodies and subjectivity. She discusses de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty to advance the theory that the body is a situation, arguing that "to say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that my body will significantly influence both what society—others—make of me...but it is also to acknowledge that no specific form

of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body” (114). This stance recognizes both the individual conditions of any particular woman’s body, while simultaneously leaving room for considerations of race, class, sexuality, age and all the other cultural markers. This position also affirms that competing cultural markers also attempt to impose their own set of meanings and limits on the body. Moi concludes that “The ‘materiality of the body’ is a problem produced by the poststructuralist picture of sex and gender, not by any concrete questions feminists have asked about sex or the body. Ultimately, Butler loses sight of the body that her work tries to account for: the concrete, historical body that loves, suffers, and dies” (49). This definition, of the body as a lived situation, contingent with an individual’s subjectivity, will be the operating theory of the body as I move forward into the next sections of this chapter.

Only in feminist theory would I have to begin a discussion about the female body by first having to prove that it exists. For the rest of the world, it often seems like the female body is the only part of a woman that actually matters.

As I write this, 246 Nigerian schoolgirls are entering their second month of captivity since having been kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorist group, forced to convert from Christianity to Islam and sold as “brides” and slaves. In the past week and a half from the date when I first wrote this paragraph<sup>6</sup> two sisters in

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<sup>6</sup> June 5, 2014



India, ages 13 and 15, were raped and then left hanging to die by three brothers. Three male high school students in Calhoun, Georgia raped a female classmate at a prom party while another classmate guarded the door. A twenty year old male college student at the University of Santa Barbara killed seven students, including his two male roommates, two sorority sisters and three random bystanders, because, in his words, "You girls have never been attracted to me. I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it... If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you" (Elliott Roger's Retribution). And these were only the heavily publicized acts of violence against women that appeared in the news this week. If we rely on statistical averages, there were many more world-wide violent crimes against women that never made it into the national and global news.

For example, according to the World Health Organization:

- Violence against women - particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women - are major public health problems and violations of women's human rights.
- Recent global prevalence figures indicate that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.
- On average, 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner.
- Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner.

And on Sept. 5 2014 the CDC issued a report stating that 1 in 5 American women will be raped in their lifetime. Clearly, in the world of lived experience, a woman's body is still a body at risk.

In her classic 1971 essay "Rape: The All-American Crime," Susan Griffith had this to say about the culture of fear that accompanies girls as they grow into their mature sexual selves:

Each girl as she grows into womanhood is taught fear. Fear is the form in which the female internalizes both chivalry and the double standard. Since, biologically speaking, women in fact have the same if not greater potential for sexual expression as do men, the woman who is taught that she must behave differently from men must also learn to distrust her own carnality. She must deny her own feelings and learn not to act from them. She fears herself. This is the essence of passivity, and of course a woman's passivity is not simply sexual but functions to cripple her from self-expression in all areas of her life...It is in this sense that a woman is denied the status of a human being. She is not free to be. (324)

The woman's body is the central way women are objectified and "othered," in American culture and throughout much of the world. To use Griffith's language, the woman's body is the way women become non-human. Because of this objectification and fear, women are taught to dissociate themselves from their own physical being in numerous ways, both subtle and obvious.

For example: sexuality. In "*This Sex Which Is Not One*," Luce Igararay states "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (363). It is masculine pleasure that defines the sexual act and delineates what is sexually desirable. In this system, a woman finds her

sexual power in being the object of desire the male wants her to be. In her discussion of Irigaray's work, Ann Rosalind Jones states that Irigaray argues

that women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centered concepts, have had no way of knowing or representing themselves. But she offers as the starting point for a female self-consciousness the facts of women's bodies and women's sexual pleasure, precisely because they have been so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse. (372)

Irigaray wants women to start with their own physical bodies because there is a truth in bodies that if listened to and followed, can create a reality of being that operates outside of the strictures of male sexuality.

Jones goes on to discuss all three of the major *écriture féminine* writers and their emphasis on women's sexuality as the starting point for women's freedom, explaining

What Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous do in common, then, is to oppose women's bodily experience (or in Kristeva's case, women's bodily effect as mothers) to the phallic/symbolic patterns embedded in Western thought. ...if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men. (374)

Jones goes on to challenge the reliance on a shared universal nature of women's sexuality, asking "What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women" (376) and that "surely any one woman gives different meanings to her sexuality throughout her individual history" (378), leading to her conclusion that "we remember what women really share is an oppression on all levels,

although it affects each in different ways” (381). That is, similarities in women’s physiology are less important than culturally imposed differences.

This seems fairly obvious, but in asserting this truth, do we also lose sight of the constructed nature of women’s sexuality, that it is seen and perceived through masculine eyes and agendas, that across cultures women’s sexuality is seen to “belong” to men, whether through a legal structure that encodes this into law, or more subtly in Western culture. That is, by rejecting the theory of *écriture feminine* as “essentialist” because it does not allow for individual responses, do we also overlook the common culture that women exist in, at least through their nationalities, and through which their sexuality is defined?<sup>7</sup> And by ignoring what is common to us, do we help to create the environment for male-centered definitions of female sexuality to thrive? In the US, for example, what Susan Griffin described in 1971 is still true today, “the expectation that, not only does a woman mean “yes” when she says “no” but that a really decent woman ought to begin by saying “no” and then be led down the primrose path to acquiescence” (322).<sup>8</sup> Even today, a woman who is frank about her sexual needs and proactive in meeting them is deemed suspect. A woman’s sexuality is seen as “legitimate” if it arises in connection with a relationship with a man; if it is something she owns herself it is threatening.

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<sup>7</sup> Despite accusations of essentialism, many of the Second Wave authors who wrote on women’s sexuality were able to simultaneously discuss the male-centered culture which all women’s sexuality exists in, and the particular struggles of groups of women. For example, Susan Griffin’s “Rape: The All-American Crime,” which I am discussing in this section, spends part of its analysis exploring the effect of white male sexual culture on black men and women.

<sup>8</sup> This will be further discussed as I explore rape culture.

Catherine MacKinnon has a theory of women's sexuality that addresses the common culture under which all women are defined and assessed, without essentializing that culture or any individual woman's place in it. For MacKinnon, female sexuality is firmly rooted in gender inequality. Her description of how this works is worth quoting in full:

A feminist theory of sexuality would locate sexuality within a theory of gender inequality, meaning the social hierarchy of men over women. To make a theory feminist, it is not enough that it be authored by a biological female. Nor that it describe female sexuality as different from (if equal to) male sexuality, or as if sexuality in women ineluctably exists in some realm beyond, beneath, above, behind—in any event, fundamentally untouched and unmoved by—an unequal social order. *A theory of sexuality becomes feminist to the extent it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive in the meaning of gender.* Such an approach centers feminism on the perspective of the subordination of women to men as it identifies sex—that is, the sexuality of dominance and submission—as crucial, as a fundamental, as on some level definitive, in that process. Feminist theory becomes a project of analyzing that situation in order to face it for what it is, in order to change it. (*italics mine, Toward* 316)

MacKinnon is clear that for her, a feminist theory of sexuality directly implicates male dominance and power as the underlying dynamic in determining sexuality. Naming this situation is how it will be changed.

It is understandable why many feminists don't like this definition of women's sexuality: no one wants to think that their sexuality is determined by men, or "outdated" gender roles, particularly in this contemporary moment when women are seen as controlling their own destinies and desires. However, I believe MacKinnon's theory of sexuality fits neatly into Susan Douglas's theory of

enlightened sexism, that women feel because they know that sexist stereotypes exist they can therefore play to them, as if the knowledge of them gives the acting of them less power. When in reality, it gives it more. Again, to quote MacKinnon:

All women live in sexual objectification like fish live in water. Given the statistical realities [of rape and sexual abuse of women and girls], all women live all the time under the shadow of the threat of sexual abuse. The question is, what can life as a woman mean, what can sex mean to targeted survivors in a rape culture... Women cope with objectification through trying to meet the male standard, and measure their self-worth by the degree to which they succeed. Women seem to cope with sexual abuse principally through denial or fear. On the denial side, immense energy goes into defending sexuality as just fine and getting better all the time, and into trying to make sexuality feel all right, like it is supposed to feel... Faced with no alternatives, the strategy to acquire self-respect and pride is: I chose it. (*Sexuality* 340)

MacKinnon recognizes what our current culture of “choice” has forgotten—that one of the most debilitating results of our cultural-wide sexual objectification of women and women’s bodies is that women have to figure out a way to live in this culture with self-respect. That means that they have to figure out how to “own” the culture of fear that surrounds their sexuality and the vulnerability of their bodies. The easiest way to do this is to deny that there is anything wrong and insist that you have chosen how you display and experience your sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

Pop culture is beginning to recognize that the gendered ubiquity of sexual objectification has taken over women’s consciousness. In the 2011 movie *Crazy Stupid Love*, Ryan Gosling’s character, the smooth talking, womanizer Jacob,

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<sup>9</sup> I will explore this more closely in chapter 5, the repercussions of the rhetoric of “choice.”

says to Steve Carell's newly separated Cal, "The war between the sexes is over. We won the second women started doing pole dancing for exercise." In her novel *Gone Girl*, Gillian Flinn (I assume unknowingly, but maybe not) articulates MacKinnon's theory of sexuality and Douglas's theory of enlightened sexism as experienced in the lives of real women, in the persona of what her main female character Amy calls "The Cool Girl:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.

Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men – friends, coworkers, strangers – giddy over these awful pretender women, and I'd want to sit these men down and calmly say: You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them. I'd want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: The bitch doesn't really love chili dogs that much – no one loves chili dogs that much! And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. (210)

Or, as MacKinnon says, "the interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means in life, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed" (*Toward* 317). Flinn describes in fiction what many women experience in their actual lives—that they are acting out a script so that men will

desire and admire them. Women are directly taking the elements of what they perceive to be essential to male desire, and pretending they have it, whether they do or not. And at some point, this acting, this pretense, morphs into the woman feeling as if she has made a “choice” to act this way, even if she knows better. Flinn says these elements come from “too many movies written by socially awkward men.” For MacKinnon, pornography is one of the main ways in which sexuality is socially constructed. As she states,

Pornography permits men to have whatever they want sexually...It shows what men want and gives it to them. From the testimony of the pornography, what men want is: Women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled, women killed. Or, to be fair to the soft core, women sexually accessible, have-able, there for them, wanting to be taken and used, with perhaps just a little light bondage. (*Toward* 326)

Pornography promotes male dominance and female submission, as well as humiliation, pain or at the minimum ever-present readiness for any man, as the sexual norm that all people, male and female, should expect. The way this manifests in culture runs the spectrum of what we know as rape culture (discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter), with at one end, a man telling a woman he does not know to “smile,” and at the opposite end someone like Elliot Rogers in Santa Barbara, murdering strangers because women have rejected him sexually. For MacKinnon, one of the major contributing factors to all of this behavior is pornography.



Pornography leads to sexual objectification (according to MacKinnon “having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way” (*Toward* 329)). Sexual objectification then becomes sex—while there are cultural differences in how this is expressed, and women who try to fight against this in individual ways, the sex act itself is determined by male sexuality (sex is typically defined by male penetration and orgasm) and experienced by men and women as an act of power, with women constructed as objects serving male desire and pornography serving as the vehicle through which woman’s ‘otherness’ and male desire are constructed. She adds to this argument in her essay “Not a Moral Issue” when she states “Men treat women as who they see women as being. Pornography constructs who that is. Men’s power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be. Pornography is that way” (*Moral* 326). MacKinnon agrees that this definition leaves out love and emotional connection, emotions commonly experienced between many sexual partners. But, as she says, “love and affection are not what is sexualized in this society’s actual sexual paradigm” (*Toward* 327). If love was sexualized then loving couples would dominate pornography.

A reasonable person might ask—but surely pornography is not pervasive today? We know better than to be influenced by porn. However, because of the ubiquity and ease of access of the Internet, pornography is worse today than it ever was. Before the internet, buying porn used to take some courage—you had

to go to the store, interact with another person, before you could buy a magazine or movie. This didn't stop everyone from access to porn, but it certainly kept consumption under some kind of control, especially for children who weren't allowed to purchase those items. Now, however, everyone has porn readily available at the click of a mouse. And apparently, everyone is using it: pornography is a \$12 billion industry in the US, \$57 billion world-wide. There are 4.2 million pornography Internet websites (12 % of the total number internet websites), with 25% of the total daily search engine requests involving porn. Even more shockingly, the average age of first time viewers of internet porn is 11 years old, the largest consumers of internet porn are the 12-17 year old age group, and 90% of children ages 8-16 have watched some kind of porn online (often while doing homework).<sup>10</sup> Pornography is a fact of life for kids growing up today; pornographic depictions of women determine how kids think of sexuality, what they think men and women want from sex and how to behave, what women should look like and how they should act.

The effects of the ubiquity of internet porn are just beginning to be researched and published. But, in this age of overwhelming divisiveness across the political spectrum, there appears to be one thing that most people, from the conservative Focus on the Family to academic sex researchers can all agree on: internet porn is bad for men, women, and sexual pleasure. In a 2010 interview on CNN, sociology professor Gail Dines described the "level of brutality and

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<sup>10</sup> Statistics taken from <https://wsr.byu.edu/pornographystats>

cruelness, in pornography's affecting the way that men think about women, and it's affecting the way they think about themselves and the way they construct ideas about sexuality" (Balan). Dines's comment has been repeated and supported through numerous studies. Internet porn directly, negatively impacts the way we view sex and the ways in which men and women internalize sexual standards and expectations.

In this area, MacKinnon made a mistaken hypothesis. She wrote her major pornography papers before the ubiquity of either the internet or internet porn. She did however write during a time when porn was becoming more available to women, and suggested that as this increased,

pornography has become ubiquitous. Sexual terrorism has become democratized. Crucially, pornography has become truly available to women for the first time in history...This central mechanism of sexual subordination, this means of systematizing the definition of women as a sexual class, has now become available to its victims for scrutiny and analysis as an open public system, not just as a private secret abuse. Hopefully, this was a mistake. (Moral 331)

The mistake MacKinnon hoped for was that as women gained access to porn and to the images and degradation of women that porn proliferated, that women would speak out against them and curtail pornography. Instead, as porn has become easily available to men and women, the standards of porn have been internalized by women (and men). Instead of disappearing, pornography has grown, and women's internalization of porn standards as common-sense markers of women's beauty has become seemingly cemented in our culture.

Take Flynn's description of the Cool Girl who regularly has threesomes and anal sex, or a typical 20-something who waxes her pubic hair because it makes her feel "cleaner." There is nothing wrong with any of these actions on their own. The problem is that they have all become "normalized," accepted as routine in our culture, internalized as part of a healthy sexuality, and yet they are all based on Internet Porn. And this is the bottom line of how women are viewed on the Internet: as Adam Savage, one of the hosts of TV's *Mythbusters* put it in a mothman talk about speaking to his 12 year old twin sons about why they shouldn't watch internet porn: "The Internet hates women" (Savage). It's one thing for an individual to have a pleasurable, adventurous sexual life; it's another thing altogether when men and women alike internalize their assumptions about sexual desire and women's bodies based on a medium that, on the whole, despises women and treats their bodies as disposable, interchangeable commodities in service to men.

So: if we take Griffin's idea that women are taught to connect their bodies with fear, and connect that to the ways in which women are taught to sexually objectify themselves and their own sexual pleasure through pornography standards, where does that leave the woman's body? Where it has always been: in a rape culture.

## CHAPTER V

### RAPE CULTURE

The 2004 film *The Notebook*, starring Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams, is a touchstone romantic movie for a generation of American women. It contains many of the staples of the romance genre: a boy from the wrong side of the tracks falling for a rich girl, complete with passionate attraction and heartbreaking misunderstandings. The romantic couple lose each other during wartime and reunite at the last minute, right before the heroine marries the wrong man (a good man, solid, reasonable, who loves her). The reunited couple make out in the rain and live a full and happy life together. *The Notebook* celebrates faithful, passionate love and devotion and according to IMDb, has grossed almost \$115 million at the box office. Ask any white, middle class American woman between the ages of 20-30 what her favorite romantic movie is, and there is a strong chance that she will say *The Notebook*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Notebook* is also a prime example of rape culture, a foundational text if we want to discover what rape culture is, and why it is so hard to see it in American cultural life. In her 1993 groundbreaking book *Transforming a Rape Culture*, Emilie Buchwald describes rape culture as, in part,

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<sup>1</sup> This is an anecdotal figure, based solely on the things women college students in my classes have said over the past 10 years, and from the overwhelming number of websites devoted to the impact of this film.

a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm. (xi)

*The Notebook* meets these criteria. In the opening scene of the movie, Gosling's Noah meets McAdams' Allie at a carnival. Allie is riding a ferris wheel with two friends. Noah spots her as she gets on the ride and immediately climbs to the top of the Ferris Wheel, and then hangs from the spokes to speak with her as the ride goes round. He asks her out on a date. She refuses. He then threatens to kill himself by letting go of the spokes if she won't go out with him. Frightened for his life, she accepts. In the next scene, Noah runs up to Allie on the street, reminding her of her promise to go out on a date. She refuses again, saying she only said yes so that he wouldn't hurt himself. He then bullies her, saying that she doesn't keep her promises. She walks on.

Next scene, Allie is waiting for friends to go to the movies. Noah joins the group and forces himself into the movies with them, sitting next to Allie. After the movie, he walks her down the street, where he tells her that he knows her better than she knows herself. He encourages her to lie down with him in the center of a busy intersection, tells her that she needs to have "hope," and that she is too uptight and in control. When she finally gives into him, a car comes down the street and almost hits them. After this, they fall in love. The exact line of dialogue is:

Duke[Older Noah]: They didn't agree on much. In fact they rarely agreed on anything. They fought all the time and they challenged each other everyday...

Young Noah: [Allie and Noah are fighting] Don't push me!  
[Allie pushes Noah anyway]

Duke: ...But in spite their differences, they had one important thing in common, they were crazy about each other.

And the film cuts to some spectacular make-out scenes.

All this is to say that *The Notebook* begins with a man threatening a woman with his own physical harm to force her to date him, then bullies and belittles her into acting against her own better knowledge, wearing her down until she gives into him. They argue constantly, including some physical violence; that this physical and emotional violence also manifests as sexual attraction is seen as making them “passionate” and “romantic” and justifying their love. Examined clinically, most people would say that a relationship with these components is deeply unhealthy and dangerous. But when presented with actors who have the good looks and charm of McAdams and Gosling, it is all too easy for viewers to see this as a desirable romance. This movie, where violence and bullying of women is presented as key to romance, as reflecting the “passion” of Gosling’s Noah and as something good that Allie needs for her own self-improvement,<sup>2</sup> exemplifies the confusion of rape culture. The emotional terrorism at the

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<sup>2</sup> Women’s “self-improvement” is another recurring theme, along with “choice,” and “empowerment,” that 1) serve to culturally restrain women by placing their actions firmly in the realm of the private, and 2) diminish the political power of feminism by limiting it to a ‘lifestyle choice.’ See Chapters Two and Five for more discussion on this.

beginning of the movie is never questioned (except, in the beginning, by Allie). Instead, it is seen as heroic and romantic.

This pattern is reflected in movie after movie; indeed, it is a staple of the romantic comedy genre. I don't mean to let my own generation off the hook. I have been partly in love with John Cusak's character Lloyd Dobbler in the 1989 movie *Say Anything* from the moment I saw the movie in the theaters. And the scene where he goes to his girlfriend's house in the middle of the night after she has broken up with him (and after he has called her repeatedly, even though she asks him not to), and raises his boom box to play the Peter Gabriel song "In Your Eyes," is by now a famous and iconic image. But examined with a critical, not a romantic, consciousness, it is stalker behavior. Tell someone that "my old boyfriend won't leave me alone, he shows up at my house in the middle of the night playing loud music to wake me up," and that person will likely say call the police. But seen in the movies, it becomes an iconic scene of romance.

Stalking is seen as so romantic that the ultimate creepy stalking song, The Police's "Every Breath You Take," is chosen by couples to be "their" song at their wedding. This song, listed as number 25 on Billboard's Hot 100 All Time Songs in 2008, includes the well known lyrics "Every single day/ Every word you say... I'll be watching you." Sting himself told BBC radio 2 in an interview that "I think the song is very, very sinister and ugly and people have actually misinterpreted it as being a gentle little love song, when it's quite the opposite." Sting doesn't explore why so many fans have misinterpreted the song, but looking at it from a



rape culture perspective it is quite clear: they've been socialized to believe that stalking is a sign of love, not danger.

One last, contemporary example: the most popular pop song in the summer of 2013 was Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," a song in which the singer is trying to convince a woman with a boyfriend to cross those blurred lines of consent and sleep with him. It's an extremely catchy song with a great melody, attached to some horrific lyrics that along with the chorus "I'm gon take a good girl/I know you want it/I know you want it...I hate these blurred lines," also includes the lyrics "I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two," and "Nothing like your last guy, he too square for you/He don't smack that ass and pull your hair like that." These lyrics are included in a song so catchy and light, such a perfect summer pop song, that I've found myself dancing to the music when the song comes on the radio, before I realize which song it is and change the channel, disgusted with Robin Thicke and myself.

The trouble with scenes and songs like these is that, while we may "know" that a man who won't leave a woman alone after she's broken up with him, or who says he will kill himself if she won't date him, is a troubled man who must be avoided at all costs, pop culture tell us a different story. Pop culture tells us that this behavior is a sign of passion and true love. Women must give into it if they want not only the man, but the passionate romantic life that is still the cultural benchmark of success for contemporary women. So when, in real life, a woman is faced with a man acting in ways similar to the ways portrayed in romantic

movies or songs that she thinks tell the story of love, she is confused. Everything in her culture tells her that this is romantic, even if it feels wrong. Her instincts may be telling her to run, but her socialization tells her to stay. And that is just one of the insidious ways rape culture works in our society to create an ongoing continuum of violence towards women in the name of love.<sup>3</sup>

The most insidious part of rape culture is that it is everywhere and therefore invisible and considered simply a cultural norm, a part of everyday life.

As the website Force: Upsetting Rape Culture puts it:

Rape culture includes jokes, TV, music, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery, that make violence against women and sexual coercion seem so normal that people believe that rape is inevitable. Rather than viewing the culture of rape as a problem to change, people in a rape culture think about the persistence of rape as “just the way things are.” (Upsetting Rape Culture)

The persistence of rape culture includes such cultural narratives as the myth that rape can be prevented (and therefore women and young girls are responsible for preventing it), the idea that reporting rape is a reasonable and effective way of ensuring justice for the victim (the U.S. Department of Justice reports there is a backlog of 400,000 rape kits in the U.S.), and the frequent media narrative of sympathy for the rapist, such as the recent portrayal on CNN and other prominent TV networks of the “end of the promising future” for the Steubenville

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<sup>3</sup> This was made absolutely clear on the soap opera *General Hospital*. In 1979 the character Luke raped the character Laura. In 1981 the two get married, in what still remains the most watched hour of soap opera television in history (I was there, sighing in love along with 30 million other viewers).

Ohio high school football players convicted of raping and filming the rape of a teenage girl at a party.<sup>4</sup>

Another prominent feature of rape culture is the idea that there is a certain kind of man who rapes, a bad man, and that most men are not like that. And, as discussed in Chapter Two, in the response to Zerlina Maxwell when she stated on Fox News that men need to be taught not to rape, we better not say that these good men have any responsibility for ending rape culture. After all, why should they, when the strongest narrative in rape culture is that women are responsible for their own rape?

In 1983, Andrea Dworkin gave a speech to the National Organization for Changing Men, to an audience she describes as around 500 men, with a scattering of women. This speech was transcribed into her essay “I want a Twenty-Four-Hour Truce During Which There Is No Rape.” In this speech, which opens with her statement “I have thought a great deal about how a feminist, like myself, addresses an audience primarily of political men who say that they are antisexist” (13), Dworkin holds these men accountable for violence against women. In speaking about the male socialization to rape, she says to her audience “the problem is that you think it’s out there: and it’s not out there. It’s in you” (16). She goes on to call out “The solution of the men’s movement to make men less dangerous to each other by changing the way you touch and feel each other is not a solution. It’s a recreational break” (17). If these men mean what

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<sup>4</sup> But no worries for those rapists: the first one is out of jail after his one year sentence was completed, and back on the football team.

they are saying, Dworkin argues, they will face the issues of male supremacy and the control of sexual access to women that is socialized into all men, even the “good ones,” and work actively, politically, to ending rape. Dworkin pinpoints the ineffective, “feel good” nature of our contemporary problem solving, when she says,

It is not just a matter of your attitude. You can't think it and make it exist. You can't try sometimes, when it works to your advantage, and throw it out the rest of the time. Equality is a discipline. It is a way of life. It is a political necessity to create equality in institutions. And another thing about equality is that it cannot coexist with rape. It cannot. And it cannot coexist with pornography or with prostitution or with the economic degradation of women on any level, in any way. It cannot coexist, because implicit in all those things is the inferiority of women. (19)

Dworkin holds these men, the ones who identify themselves as good men, devoted to political equality and women's rights, the ones “working on themselves,” as accountable as any other man (the bad ones, the pornographers and the murderers and the rapists), for the rape of every woman. She pulls no punches when she says that feeling good about yourself, working on yourself, is no response to violence against women. She tells these men that they are part of the problem and they must change.

And of course, Dworkin is today the image many people have in mind when the clichés of the unattractive, hairy feminist who hates men is raised. This, despite the fact that she was married twice. She has been ridiculed by everyone,

including feminists, for her appearance, and criticized for the unequivocal stance she takes towards rape and for women's rights.<sup>5</sup> But she was right.

When I read that paragraph I quoted above, I think about the men I know and love, the good ones, who love their wives and kids, who vote Democratic, participate in their communities, think they are taking an equal share of the housework and child-rearing, and can talk about their feelings. And who have nothing to say about internet porn. We are at an age where our children are dating, and these men have lots of rueful stories to tell of "understanding women better now that I have a daughter," of talking with their daughters and sons about the kinds of people they should be, should date, the things they need to be aware of. All progressive, feminist-sounding words. They mean it; they want their daughters to be safe and well-loved, their sons to be good men. But ask them if they have ever watched internet porn, and they are silent. Or they cop to it, but say it didn't affect them. Ask them if they would organize against pornography and they say no, invoking the US Constitution and free speech. Parental controls on the computer are fine, but ending pornography, we can't do that. And we don't need to. Because rape is a crime of violence, not sex, so what we think sexually has anything to do with rape.

However, while it might be commonplace to say that rape is a crime of violence and not sex, the reality is far from being that clear cut. Yes, violence,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Ellen Willis's 1981 "Lust Horizons: Is The Women's Movement Pro-Sex?" Gayle Rubin's article "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Wendy McElroy's "XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography" and Katie Roiphe's book *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*.

power and aggression are all at play when a woman (or man or child) is threatened with rape, and it is important that this be clearly recognized. However, as Catherine MacKinnon shows, there is a consequence to the narrowing of rape to issues of physical domination, as this “obscured its elements of sex. Aside from failing to answer the rather obvious question, if it’s violence not sex, why didn’t he just hit her? this approach made it impossible to see that violence is sex when it is practiced as sex” (134). In other words, a sex act such as rape can be violent, aggressive and non-consensual, but it is still sex, along with whatever other crime it is. In addition, it seems to me that people who call rape a crime of violence are limiting their definition of rape to how it is perceived by the male rapist. Claiming rape as an act of violence minimizes awareness of the repercussions of the rape on the sexual lives of victims of rape. In reality, the sexuality of a person who has been raped becomes conflated with fear, terror, impotence, and can be a trigger for PTSD flashbacks that directly affect the quality of his or her intimate life.

Rape is an act of sexual violence and it has real, lived repercussions on the sexual lives of its victims. Reducing rape to a crime of violence only is, as Catherine MacKinnon calls it, “analytic wish-fulfillment [which] makes it possible for rape to be opposed by those who would save sexuality from the rapists while leaving the sexual fundamentals of male dominance intact” (135). This rhetorical strategy serves to support our tacit cultural accommodation to rape culture and the “othered” nature of women’s sexual autonomy. It is essential that rape be

seen as a sexual act, particularly to understand its place in the continuum of rape culture and the sexual exploitation of women.

Susan Brownmiller's explosive 1975 treatise on rape, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* made rape and rape awareness into a pressing social issue, disrupting the silence and shame with which rape was previously handled in our cultural life and bringing the pervasiveness of rape in women's lives into visibility. Like Dworkin (but preceding her chronologically), Brownmiller argues that the participation of good men in examining their own participation in rape culture is vital to being able to ever end rape. She gives numerous examples to show that "there can be no private solutions to the problem of rape," (400), proving that any individual woman's actions to ensure her own safety can never be enough to end not only rape, but the fear and threat of rape that informs the life of every single adult woman. Men must participate in ending rape because, even "the most perfect rape laws in the land, strictly enforced by the best concerned citizens, will not be enough to stop rape" (400). To end rape, men must look to their own participation in our culture of male entitlement and male aggression, to their own culpability in its reproduction:

A possible deep-down reason why even the best of our concerned, well-meaning men run to stereotypic warnings when they seek to grapple with the problem of rape deterrence is that they *prefer* to see rape as a woman's problem, rather than as a societal problem resulting from a distorted masculine philosophy of aggression. For when men raise the spectre of the unknown rapist, they refuse to take psychological responsibility for the nature of his act. (Brownmiller 400)

Just as white people often refuse to, or cannot, see the dominance of white privilege and how that effects everyday life for whites and blacks alike in our culture, so men (and many women), have been educated away from what Brownmiller sees as the “critical function [of rape]. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear (15). This fear leads women to think that if they do the “right things” to avoid rape, they will be safe. And concurrently, that if they don’t do those things, they are to blame for what happens to them. Placed in this double bind, most women live with some part of them in that state of fear that Brownmiller describes, a part of them always on alert.<sup>6</sup>

The contemporary feminist website Shakesville.com has a hard-hitting piece on the things women are told to do to protect themselves from rape. It’s a long list, and I am going to quote the whole thing here, as it shows the overwhelming, contradictory and ridiculous things women are expected to go through to keep themselves safe:

Rape culture is telling girls and women to be careful about what you wear, how you wear it, how you carry yourself, where you walk, when you walk there, with whom you walk, whom you trust, what you do, where you do it, with whom you do it, what you drink, how much you drink, whether you make eye contact, if you're alone, if you're with a stranger, if you're in a group, if you're in a group of strangers, if it's dark, if the area is unfamiliar, if you're carrying something, how you carry it, what kind of shoes you're

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<sup>6</sup> An intriguing thought: being on a state of alert leads to higher levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, in the body. Higher levels of cortisol have been called “public enemy number one” in Psychology Today, and are associated with a higher risk of many diseases, including heart disease, lower immune function, obesity, depressions and cancer, particularly breast cancer in women. Could there be a physiological connection between the chronic “on alert” fear that women experience daily in rape culture and the growing incidence of these conditions? (Bergland)



wearing in case you have to run, what kind of purse you carry, what jewelry you wear, what time it is, what street it is, what environment it is, how many people you sleep with, what kind of people you sleep with, who your friends are, to whom you give your number, who's around when the delivery guy comes, to get an apartment where you can see who's at the door before they can see you, to check before you open the door to the delivery guy, to own a dog or a dog-sound-making machine, to get a roommate, to take self-defense, to always be alert always pay attention always watch your back always be aware of your surroundings and never let your guard down for a moment lest you be sexually assaulted and if you are and didn't follow all the rules *it's your fault*. (Martin)

Rhetorically, this piece attempts to reproduce the relentless pressure women feel to remain safe in a rape culture, the pre-emptive attempts to render themselves not at fault if sexual violence occurs. The use of a single sentence builds up the sheer number and impossibility of taking everything into account. The use of italics for *it's all your fault*, to reinforce the underlying cultural assumption women attempt to fight against. The collapse of important elements into shallow ones, all indistinguishable from one another, so that ultimately this list becomes a meaningless joke, but anchored in the relentless social truth of rape culture: If you get raped it's all your fault.

Second wave feminists were acutely aware of the political and social underpinnings of rape culture, and much of their work was devoted to bringing about meaningful, substantial change in the laws and attitudes towards rape. Why, then, has so little actually changed? Why do we in the United States still live in a rape culture (let alone other parts of the world where in some places rape culture is substantially worse)? Why did the White House's recently announced plan to make visible and change the substantial number of rapes on

college campuses across the country meet with so much resistance? In my state of Virginia, why did a man recently found guilty of raping a fellow student at James Madison University receive the ridiculous “punishment” of being banned from life from JMU, the ban to go into effect after he graduates from the college, and not before? Why do women still walk quickly when out alone at night, keys in between their fingers to act as a “weapon”? Why, when I asked students in my recent “Gender and Society” class what they do to prevent rape, did the women have a long list that every other woman in class recognized and affirmed, and why did the men look first astonished and then confused as the list on the board grew ever longer? And finally for this project, where are the contemporary academic feminists? Why aren’t they speaking out against rape culture?

For one thing, rape is linked to pornography, especially in the work of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. When the Second Wave movement began, anti-pornography and rape awareness movements received a great deal of attention and praise. In response, however, an equally strong group of feminist activists emerged, who wanted to reclaim sexual agency for women and saw shutting down pornography as a means of shutting down sexual freedom for women. In her review of the “pornography wars,” Susan Fraiman, states

Antipornographers are accused of being antisex, of regressing to the Puritanism and class condescension of many Victorian feminists, of abetting the Moral Majority, and of jeopardizing free speech. Prosex feminists, for their part, are accused of condoning a multibillion dollar global industry of sexual violence against children and women, its worst victims coming from third world countries. (*Pornography Wars* 744)

The discussion of sexual violence, particularly rape and rape culture, in academic theory, became submerged in the battle over pornography and sexuality, so much so that in 2002 Carine M. Mardoorossian opened her article “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,” with the sentence “Sexual violence has become the taboo subject of feminist theory today...Rape has become academia’s undertheorized and apparently untheorizable issue” (743). Mardoorossian’s article, published in the feminist journal *Signs*, draws attention to poststructuralist feminist theorist’s lack of engagement with rape. What little engagement with rape there is, she states, focuses on “an examination of the “psychology of power” than to the discursive study of rape and victimization” (761). She singles out Sharon Marcus who did publish one of the few postmodern analysis of rape, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” as the lone instance of attention to rape by contemporary postmodern feminists. She applauds Marcus’s attempts, but is aghast at her conclusions, particularly where Marcus holds feminist linguistic discussions of rape—that is, feminists who believe we live in a culture of rape—as causing an environment which is, as Marcus states, “a scripted interaction in which one person auditions for the role of rapist and strives to maneuver another person into the role of victim, . . . a process of gendering which we can attempt to disrupt” (391). Mardoorossian’s response to this theory of women’s blame is to state that

The assumption that rape is successful because of women’s passive compliance with a sexual and linguistic script is problematic on two counts: first, because it implies that women who get raped do not in fact

strategize prior to the rape and therefore that their rape necessarily signifies their submission to the role of victim; second, because focusing on women's reaction or lack thereof during an attack necessarily takes the focus off the rapist and places it—along with the “responsibility” for the outcome of this scripted interaction—on women and women alone. (753)

That is, the poststructuralist feminist theory of rape, what little there is, is more of the same historical finger pointing that has always blamed women for their own rapes, and, in its contemporary iteration, blames feminist articulation of rape culture as being directly responsible for rape.

Mardoossian is very clear that the absence of a critical, theoretical examination of rape has led directly to the cultural mindset that feminists want women to see themselves as victims, and to describe consensual sexual encounters as rape. She states:

As a result of the notable lack of theoretical engagement with sexual violence in academia, it is media friendly conservative writers such as Katie Roiphe (1993), Camille Paglia (1991), and Christina Sommers (1994) who have set the tone and the parameters for the analysis of rape in the public sphere, so much so that any discussion of the issue seems inevitably locked in terms established by the backlash. These self-proclaimed feminist writers all have one thing in common beside the fact that their books have been best-sellers: they downplay the severity of the problem of rape by blaming the high incidence of rape in the United States on the warped and unnecessarily alarmist representations of “radical” feminism. They go to great lengths to debunk the rape statistics offered in feminist surveys and antirape literature and to argue that the problem is really not as widespread as we are led to believe. Victims in fact owe their victimization not to the experience of rape but to a feminist propaganda that has brain-washed women into thinking of themselves as victims. (753)

Mardoorossian's analysis demonstrates that in the absence of any alternative point of view, the opinion of Roiphe and others that rape is not a significant problem and that women are not victims has been allowed to directly influence the way we think and talk about rape and rape culture. It's not surprising: this is the view that we have been educated to believe; media-savvy writers like Roiphe simply exploit a point of view people are culturally primed to believe anyway. Academic feminism needs to create the alternative view that Mardoorossian calls for, to return to rape theory and directly, succinctly and with some measure of common sense, address rape and rape culture. Women's studies departments need to do more to address rape culture, and men's participation in it, than offer a "Take Back the Night" march and an annual performance of The Vagina Monologues.

This is difficult to do—challenging the status quo, declaring that all men, even the good ones, are part of the problem of rape culture, asserting the nuanced position of a pro-sexuality/anti rape culture stance are all challenging, controversial acts. But if we are ever to move out of rape culture, they must be done. As political science professor Caroline Heldman said (on Twitter): "We harbor a mass delusion that a brand of feminism that is in no way threatening to patriarchy or capitalism is going to get us somewhere." @carolineheldman 8/27/14, 10:46AM.

Luckily, despite the absence of this critical voice in the academy, feminist activists in other cultural spheres are bringing an awareness of the continuum of

violence in rape culture to cultural awareness. The strongest voices for feminist and rape culture activism are found in social media sites such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. According to ValentiMartin Media, a feminist media consulting group,

Every single day, 172 million people visit Facebook, 40 million visit Twitter, and two million publish blog posts. Contrary to media depictions of online activity as largely narcissistic and/or “slactivism,” young women across the country—and all over the world, in fact—are discovering new ways to leverage the Internet to make fundamental progress in the unfinished revolution of feminism. (Valenti Martin)

Some of the more exciting sites to combat rape culture include Everyday Sexism, a website and twitter feed where women from all over the world write about acts of sexism they encounter as they live their lives. A typical day’s postings include some versions of each of the following stories, all also an example of what happens to women in a rape culture:

One day I was eating a burger in my car, in the parking lot of a fast food restaurant in the Los Angeles area. Some dude popped out of the bushes and ejaculated on my window. I told a policeman about it later in the day, and he basically just hit on me, he didn't think it was worth filing a report. Everydaysexism.com July 03 2014

I'm an American 13 year old girl. In school at the age of twelve two boys broke into the girls locker room. I was running late for gym so I saw them open the doors, all the other girls started screaming I walked forward and pulled them both out by the backpack and pushed one into the door and elbowed the other in the stomach. They both took a swing and missed and I ran into the locker room and shut the door. Later the two boys got off with a warning and I got detention for a week for fighting. That is what I got for fighting back what I did was only brushing the top of what I could do (I am a black belt in tae kwon do) I didn't draw blood or leave an bruises I

did what I did to preserve the other girls dignity and my own. This is every day sexism Everyday sexism.com July 3 2014

Since the advent of cell phones I have been shown porn on a cell "as a joke" many times at various workplaces. "Come over here, look at this kitten." And it's a women with her head being thrust by a man in a violent sex act. It seems to always be oral sex as well, which is IMO very degrading to see. Getting outraged does nothing because it is "just a joke" and I am told to stop taking things so seriously, b/c we are all adults. Everyday Sexism.com July 3 2014

The goal of Laura Bates, the founder of everydaysexism.com is to show that these types of interactions are typical events in the lives of women around the world. As she states on her website, "By sharing your story you're showing the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women everyday and it is a valid problem to discuss."

Other examples of social media being used to fight back against rape culture: the Twitter hashtag #yesallwomen, a reaction to the statement after Elliott Roger's misogynistic killing spree in Santa Barbara CA that "not all men" are rapists and therefore we can't blame men for acts like this. #Yesallwomen was created to say that while not all men are rapists, all women have experienced some form of sexual harassment and fear in their lives. The Steubenville rape case entered public consciousness when an activist found the videotape the high school boys had made of the event online, and used social media to advocate for justice. There is hope that our cultural awareness of rape culture is growing, and the voices articulating it and arguing for change are having more impact. These voices using social media to fight back against rape

culture are strong and effective. Feminist voices in the academy need to add their critical consciousness to this arena, to add the weight of our professional standing to the argument, to advocate for change in this culture that affects all women and all men.

This chapter is personal to me. My children are 11 and 13 years old. They and their friends, people I've watched grow up, are entering their adolescence, opening to their sexuality and the myriad of emotions and experiences that accompany that. I want them to have happy sex lives. I want them to take pleasure in their bodies, in their unique expressions of their masculine and feminine natures. I want them to be safe. In particular, I want my daughter to be safe from physical violence and rape, and I want my son to be safe from a culture that teaches him to participate in a range of sexually aggressive acts towards women, from cat calling a woman on a street corner to holding a camera while others rape an unconscious girl at a party (or at least observe them without feeling called to intervene). But we don't live in the safe space I want for my children and their friends, for all kids growing up. We live in a rape culture.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE PROBLEM THAT HAS NO NAME

This is the cover of the Oct. 26 2003 *New York Times Magazine*: a picture of a white woman, probably in her late 30s. She is casually dressed but her wrists and fingers are weighed down with glittering, expensive jewelry. She sits on the floor underneath an empty, glowing ladder, a toddler nestled in her lap. The headline reads:

*Q: Why Don't More Women Get to the Top?*  
**A: *They Choose Not To*** [this in bold black print]  
*Abandoning the Climb and Heading Home*

Through this language, the *New York Times* has framed the issue so that we don't have to actually read the article, or investigate the conflicting demands of career and motherhood, to know what to think. The readers certainly don't have to imagine ways fathers, corporate culture, government regulations, or social norms might change to better accommodate workers who also are parents. Instead, through the rhetoric of the cover, particularly the use of the word choice, the *New York Times* has done all of our thinking for us. Women don't get to the top because they don't choose to. End of story.

Choice is the framework through which feminist issues such as work and mothering have been discussed in America for years, thus reducing any conflict

or consequences, personal, professional or economic agony, to personal preference and whim. Do I choose to wear blue jeans or khakis? To go to this movie or that? Do I choose to stay home with my child or go to work? We, as a culture, need have no serious discussion about how to combine the child's needs, the woman as mother and woman as worker's needs (don't even think about woman as an autonomous human having needs, that's just not allowed for mothers), the economic needs of the family—none of these issues need to be raised because mothers choose what they do and choice is personal, and often frivolous.

Language and word choice matter. As Kenneth Burke shows in "Terministic Screens," language does not only describe reality, it creates reality as well. When Burke states "much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (46), he is saying that we call something reality because of the singular reality made possible by the language we use to describe it. If we were to use different language, our perceptions of the "reality" available to the situation would similarly shift. Burke calls these perceptions our "terministic screens" and these screens direct what we see and how we respond. As he states, "We must use terministic screens, since can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to the one field rather than the other" (50). When the accepted way to describe the available paths a mother

must negotiate between work and child care is through the term “choice,” then all the cultural attention goes to a woman’s choice and leaves out any other interpretation or situational response.

In addition to “choice” turning the issue of child care and work to one of private decision making at the expense of any other systemic cultural intervention, the contemporary idea that women have choices and the choices they make are personal and private goes directly against the ideology of the Second Wave. One of the most important slogans of the Second Wave feminist movement, “The Personal is Political,” expressed the idea that what happened in a woman’s private life reflected a social reality that could be changed politically. An individual woman’s lack of access to birth control or a bank account, or being sexually harassed by her boss at work was not just a private problem but a political one, and it could be changed through political activism. As Carol Hanisch stated in her 1970 article “The Personal is Political,” “personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (76). That American women in 2014 have achieved equality under the law in many aspects of our lives is due to the Second-Wave “personal is political” approach to women’s private lives.

Consciousness raising groups were one of the primary ways in which Second Wave feminists collected private stories and turned them into political issues. In these groups, women met to describe events and circumstances in their lives and to look for the larger political factor in them. Rather than being

dismissed or invalidated, a woman's feelings about what was happening in her life were taken as concrete evidence of a larger, systemic problem that could be politically addressed. Or, as Kathie Sarachild, the originator of the idea of "consciousness raising," described it in *A Program For Feminist "Consciousness Raising,"* "Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action" (78). That is, private feelings, critical theory, public action, and political change were seen as connected components, circling in an ongoing loop, to change conditions for the better for women.

For the Second Wave, there was no such thing as a private choice isolated from the larger cultural situation. One of the most important things the Second Wave activists did was to bring to cultural awareness the realization that we live in a patriarchal society, and what that means in terms of the lives of men, women and children. Kate Millet's groundbreaking book *Sexual Politics*, first published in 1969, delineated the numerous ways in which patriarchy operates in our culture, giving feminists of her generation a way of speaking about gender that firmly rooted the private in a larger cultural system.

Today, however, it is completely passe to speak in terms of the patriarchy or women's oppression. And indeed, by many of the initial demands of the Second Wave, women are not oppressed and the patriarchy, as defined by Millet as "the institution whereby that half of the populace that is female is controlled by that half which is male" (25), is not quite as strong. Women work, get mortgages

in their own names, can sue for sex discrimination and (sometimes) win. Our bodies are still politically under siege, as conservative politicians try repeatedly to restrict women's access to birth control and abortion, but they are available.<sup>1</sup> Politics is still dominated by men,<sup>2</sup> but women are present across the United States in almost all branches of government, local, state and federal.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, these concrete changes are taken by our society at large to mean that the need for feminism is over. The language of the empowered woman is used to now enforce a covert sexism, what Susan Douglas calls "enlightened sexism." However, if we judge patriarchy and gender relations by Millet's larger framework for the terms, we can see that it is alive and indeed thriving in American life. Millet stated that "However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25). Millet was clear that patriarchy thrives regardless of its cultural visibility because it "is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic forms" (25). This was true when she first published her work in 1969, and it is still true almost 50 years later. Despite the political gains women have made, there is no sign that a foundation of patriarchy

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<sup>1</sup> Although birth control and abortion are available, in the week I write this, a woman in Pennsylvania was sentenced to up to 18 months in prison for buying abortion pills for her 16 year old daughter from an overseas internet site. In Pennsylvania, a woman's abortion must be conducted by a physician. However, the daughter did not have insurance to cover an abortion. Additionally, in Pennsylvania, due to policies designed to restrict access to abortion, one third of abortion clinics have closed since 2012 and over 87% of counties do not have an abortion provider. The nearest clinic for this woman was in another state over 70 miles away.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Center for Women and American Politics women comprise 18.5% of the seats in the US Congress, and 24.2% of the seats in state legislators across the country.

has been dislodged in our social consciousness. For a quick snapshot of contemporary patriarchy at work, look at the number of men who refuse to take paternity leave longer than a few days, or a week at most, because they won't be taken seriously at work, as discussed in Chapter Two, or women who must prove, over and over again, unlike victims of other crimes such as robbery, that they were raped or they were beaten by a partner.<sup>3</sup>

It may be more politically expedient these days to call patriarchy "sexism." It seems to be easier to get middle-of-the road people to take you more seriously. What seems even more difficult to dismantle is the idea that choice is a private, personal decision that is separate from and needs no political intervention. Women's issues in this country are more and more framed under the language of choice, or in the category of what bell hooks calls "lifestyle feminism," the idea that "there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women" (5). Hooks directly links this idea to the removal of politics from feminism, as feminism became a self-defined lifestyle choice and that "women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture" (6). Indeed, "lifestyle feminism" can be seen in the academy as well: The current trendy phrase to use in speaking of feminism is to describe instead *feminisms*. This is simply another way of saying we aren't talking—or listening—

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the NFL and the Baltimore Ravens did not give running back Ray Rice a serious penalty for hitting his then girlfriend until a video surfaced nationally in late summer 2014, showing the punch, his girlfriend dropping to the floor and Rice dragging her out of the elevator. The NFL had all the facts of the case since it happened, but only took serious measures against Rice when confronted with visual "proof" (as opposed to proof of her injuries, or a video of Rice dragging her out of the elevator).

very well to each other. Feminism does not have to have one entrenched position, but we must be able to speak with each other through competing ideologies and political practices, rather than accept our differences as some kind of feel good liberal pluralism as embodied in the word feminisms—and then feel free to ignore the cultural implications of such an ideological stance.

It's not only feminism that has this problem—the cultural narratives around many issues end up being framed as a choice, or empowerment, or self-improvement. As Angela McRobbie states, “Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a life-plan...The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices” (19).<sup>4</sup> By framing life decisions in this manner McRobbie argues, we as a culture then judge individuals (or self-judge ourselves) on how well we make those choices, rather than looking at the political structures and power dynamics that make those “choices” the only options available, and turn those decisions into a matter of personal morality rather than structural inevitability. For example, there have recently in been stories in the news of working mothers arrested for leaving their children in public spaces while they worked or went on job interviews. In many cases, these stories were presented with a moral failure slant, holding the mother responsible for her failure to care for her child, rather than looking at the story through the lens of lack of childcare solutions available for working mothers with

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<sup>4</sup> In her essay “Men Explain Things to Me,” Rebecca Solnit describes this as “Young women...needed to know that being belittled wasn't the result of their own secret failings; it was the boring old gender wars, and it happened to most of us who were female at some point or other” (12).

low paying jobs, or the consequences of a low minimum wage, or any other structural solution. Instead, the mothers made “a bad choice,” were arrested and otherwise punished, end of story.

There is no definitive line between “this is personal choice” and “this is ‘choice’ based on lack of alternatives.” Yet culturally we act as if only the personal choice exists, ignoring the fact that when a personal choice is made within a patriarchal, capitalist context such as we have in the United States, there are often only a limited number of choices available. I’m not calling for overturning our current system and replacing it with a socialist matriarchy, or anything like that. But I do think we would all be better off if, as a culture, we could examine what our current, patriarchal system, does and does not allow, without enduring ridicule for using those terminologies.

There are other consequences to the language of choice that frames so many feminist issues. As Rhiann Saseen puts it in an article on Salon.com, “The rhetoric of personal choice has created a feminism that emphasizes sound bites over politics, draining the movement of any sentiment more complex than, ‘Hooray, women.’”<sup>5</sup> This harkens back to bell hooks’ criticism of lifestyle feminism, that in accepting anything a woman does as “feminist” drains feminism of any efficacy whatsoever beyond a feel good panacea.

If women are made to feel as if we live in a feel-good, choice-driven world, where equality has been achieved and feminism is equally unnecessary and is

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<sup>5</sup> Or, as the satirical newsmagazine *The Onion* put it in a recent post: “Women are now empowered by everything a woman does.”



whatever any individual wants it to be, then we have no language not only for the patriarchal political and economic structures that govern our lives, but also the sexist cultural miasma that we live in. In her new book *Bad Feminist*, Roxanne Gay describes the common response to critiques of sexist culture—what she calls the demand that feminist cultural critics “lighten up” (189) –as being told “These are just songs. They are just jokes. It’s just a hug. They’re just breasts. Smile, you’re beautiful. Can’t a man pay you a compliment?” (189). Of course, as Barbara Tomlinson shows in her 2010 book *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trope of the Angry Feminist*, these kinds of comments are based on “gendered notions about who should keep forgiving. It functions to misdirect attention from the grounds of the joke. It positions the jokester as always innocent, the joke itself as always funny, and the consequences of the joke as always harmless” (14). To carry Tomlinson’s point further, the diminishing of the consequences of unwelcome sexualized comments and “compliments,” positions the unwanted hug, or pointed attention to a woman’s body as “always harmless” as well, and that is certainly not always true. Finally, as Gay states, the sexist commentary that women encounter are ultimately “a symptom of a much more virulent cultural sickness — one where women exist to satisfy the whims of men, one where a woman’s worth is consistently diminished or entirely ignored” (189). That is, women are still not recognized as human.

This defense, that sexist commentary is in actuality ‘only’ a harmless, pleasurable moment—the joke, the appreciative catcall—implies that there is no

danger in these actions, that they are not part of the larger culture of rape and sexism. In this way, it becomes easy to dismiss critics who insist that there is a larger and more sinister consequence to these acts. For example, Barbara Tomlinson points out that the trope of the 'angry feminist' is deployed in situations like this not as "an argument about unseemly emotions; it is a tool of discursive politics designed to enact and reinforce patterns of social dominance" (16). As Tomlinson states, invoking the angry feminist means that you don't even need to have a discussion about whatever is under review, as the "angry feminist" phrase "is designed to delegitimize feminist argument even before the argument begins, to undermine feminist politics by making its costs personal, and to foreclose feminist futures by making feminism seem repulsive to young women"(1). Like framing a woman's decision to stay home after her baby is born as a matter of personal choice alone, so calling a cultural critic an "angry feminist," similarly cuts off any discussion before it begins.

What we end up with is the absence of an accepted critical language for describing this culture. That is, a language that articulates patriarchy and sexism as still constant features in our culture that have not been eradicated, that articulates that women's existence as at essence 'human,' separate from sexuality and motherhood, is still denied, despite the political and economic gains women have made. Erika Shickel began her recent review of *Bad Feminist* for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* by stating:

AMERICA HATES WOMEN and women experience that hatred every single day in myriad ways. We are raped, assaulted, condescended to, objectified, undervalued, diminished, shot at, bullied, and bullshitted every day, everywhere. It happens on TV, in boardrooms, and bedrooms, in publishing, on the street, on the internet, too. Maybe it took Elliot Rodgers's misogynistic shooting spree in Isla Vista back in May to get everyone talking about it, but misogyny, like climate change, is getting harder and harder to deny.

This cultural hatred of women is a difficult thing to accept on its own; when combined with the concept of “choice,” and the American narrative that every woman is solely responsible for every action in her life, the culture of misogyny can become difficult to see and articulate. However, in 1963, Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* did give us the language to articulate this cultural predicament. To be sure, Friedan focused her transformative work on the impact of white, heterosexual middle class women being held back from the job market and forced into domesticity, and this stance ignored the lived realities of women of other race, class and sexualities. In addition, today, women are necessary, vital components of the workplace and so that part of Friedan's argument has been achieved. But if we examine Friedan's global descriptions of cultural expectations of women, we see that she articulated a culture that still resonates. When she states, “It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique. ...our culture does not permit women to...fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role” (77), Friedan could be making a statement about the cultural

conditions of today. This thesis—that women are not recognized as human—is as relevant in our culture of the “empowered,” “hot,” woman, who wants to “have it all,”<sup>6</sup> as it was when Friedan first published her book.<sup>7</sup>

Friedan description of how the mystique takes hold in American cultural life is equally compelling. For one thing, “it must have filled real needs in those who seized on it for others and those who accepted it for themselves, needs so compelling that we suspend critical thought” (212). Friedan describes these needs as coming from “the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world” (213) after the horrors of World War II and the explosion of the nuclear bomb. We can see a same frightening uncertainty in American life after the 9/11 attacks and the economic recession. The same needs for “normal” and reassurance of safety that existed after World War II. According to Friedan, the after-effects of the trauma of war, the displacement of women from jobs that offered economic security when men came home from war (read: layoffs, housing crisis and economic recession for this contemporary moment) made it “easier to build the need for love and sex into the end-all purpose of life, avoiding personal commitment to truth in a catch-all commitment to “home” and “family” (218). Finally, Friedan discusses

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<sup>6</sup> Don’t get me started. I could have written my dissertation on the problems with this phrase alone.

<sup>7</sup> Or when Mary Wollstonecraft made a similar call for women’s humanity, or Margaret Fuller, or Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* or the women who wrote the “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” at the Seneca Falls Convention, or, going back in time, Christine de Pizan or Julian of Norwich, or going forward Virginia Woolf, or bell hooks, and many, many others.

the basic paradox of the feminine mystique: that it emerged to glorify women's role as housewife [read: sex object, privately responsible for her own choices] at the very moment when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered, at the very moment when science and education and her own ingenuity made it possible for a woman to be both wife and mother, and to take an active part in the world outside the home. The glorification of "woman's role," [read: women's bodies, rape culture] then, seems to be in proportion to society's reluctance to treat women as complete human beings. (284)<sup>8</sup>

The repercussions and iterations of the feminine mystique may have changed since 1963, but the cultural conditioning that maintains women's place as an "other," as well as the cultural forces that continually rise to assert women's un-human status and return them to the surveillance of patriarchy, the environment that Friedan described so well, remains fully in place.

The language we use to talk about women matters deeply. Whether we are looking at academic theoretical choices to discuss women, the feminist movement and those who have come before us, or are looking at popular culture depictions of women's bodies and lives, language makes a difference. It creates the reality that we see available to us, which then gets created in the physical world. In many ways, language used in both much academic writing about women and popular cultural representations of them is a code, and when you can read the signal you behave in appropriate ways mandated by the code. These ways, whether academic through the subject matters that lead to

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<sup>8</sup> See Susan Faludi, *Backlash*, describing the cultural effort to return women to the home after some measure of political and economic equality had been achieved, and Susan Bordo's comment in Chapter One of this work that poststructuralists attempted to dismantle gender readings of culture barely more than a decade after they had begun to be produced.

promotion and value in academia , or the conflicting expectations and reduced lives embedded in the cultural practices of enlightened sexism, are often damaging, and certainly diminish and limit possibilities. However, as bell hooks states, language is also action. And as action, the language we use can change things for the better, can open up our discipline and women's lives for the better.

Despite our ongoing cultural hatred of women, despite the lack of relevant critical language coming from the academy to play the role of cultural intellectual and give a critical framework and language to discuss contemporary misogyny, I find great hope for the future of women. Social media, which is in many ways the epitome of sexism, where "rape" is used as a casual verb to mean something was difficult, where women who speak their minds are threatened daily, where video tapes showing rape and internet pornography are accessible with ease; social media is also the powerful voice of women (and men) coming together in outrage to force change. The prosecution of previously mis-handled rape cases, as well as the phrase 'rape culture,' have entered public awareness, because of Twitter and Facebook campaigns. The "Everyday Sexism" project has made thousands of women understand that the private harassment they experience is part of a larger cultural problem and can be changed. The idea that men are responsible for ending rape is gaining cultural currency. At this moment, the NFL is under extreme pressure to address domestic violence against women and children, with advertisers such as Nike and Budweiser pulling out of contracts unless conditions change.

This is all good news. And hopefully, feminist critical theory will find a way to participate in this cultural articulation of feminist principles, to return to examine its own history, free of fear and instead able to see what our own history can teach us. Susan Fraiman, Professor of English and Feminist Theory at the University of Virginia, described the contemporary atmosphere of Women's Studies, the positive ways in which the competing ideologies of theoretical positions have learned to engage with each other when she stated:

There are so many things we are smarter about this time around--among them, how to write about women without assuming they're all the same; how to write about women without assuming they play nicely; how to write about women without assuming they are defined exclusively or even primarily by gender; how to write about women whether or not we ourselves identify as women; and finally, how to write about women without writing about women all the time.(44)

In this atmosphere, academic feminists can return to the theorists of the Second Wave and re-engage with the work they did so well, getting rid of the specter of "essentialism" in order to update Second Wave theory in accessible, transformative language to address the conditions of life for American women and create positive change.

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